Zombies, Bring It On and Other Stories

Selected Flash Pieces and Proems

Hibah Shabkhez

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By
Hibah Shabkhez

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This book is dedicated to Azka Mahboob,
fellow artist and friend.

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Zastrugi

The snow fell in swift soft flakes, and the children rejoiced. When morning came the mountain-slopes would be frozen solid and they would be allowed to go skiing. The wind had other plans, however. All night it raked and tossed the snow, sculpting it into waves across which the dawn rippled red.

The children raced out into the crimson, but wiser hands pulled them back. "Do not trust the zastrugi," said the elders. "The surface seems steely under the sun, but the still-soft snow lurks underneath, ravening for your blood. Stay inside. Our houses are built strong to withstand the winter's siege."

The snow saw the longing in the children's eyes, and began to squirm under the sun's assaults, wondering how to prove itself steady enough for their little feet. The eagle of the peak, who had come to scour the farms for cattle or carrion since its natural prey had fallen or flown away, saw this folly and seethed.

The children watched the eagle clawing at the snow, marvelling at the great bird's cruel strength. Out of the clouds with a mighty thrumming came a creature more ferocious yet, a giant white bird spiting flame.

"It was the snow," said the people of the plains afterwards. "The zastrugi buckled, sloughing off the houses and casting them into the river."

"And what did the water do with them?" asked the kin of the people of the mountains.

"Why, what water always does. It bade them welcome."

Zombies, Bring It On

"Five times we've thrown back your wretched football! Clear off now, or I'll – hey!" The ball missed him by inches as it flew over the wall. "Sara!"

"Oh dear!" said Sara. The children fled, giggling at his discomfiture, and Sara hastily suppressed her own smile as he turned around.

"You shouldn't encourage those brats!"

"I know, I know," Sara crumbled up a stale biscuit to replace the crumbs knocked off the wall by the children. The birds descended on them en masse, barely hopping out of the way as Aun spluttered and shooed them.

"Come inside now," said Sara soothingly. "You have three new notifications on your phone. I heard them just now."

"These birds are even worse than the kids! Where do you get all this food to lavish on them anyway? I thought we were supposed to be budgeting!"

"They're just a couple of stale biscuits – oh! Another two notifications. It might be something important, you know. You really should check."

With one last growl at the birds Aun stalked off to the house.

"Don't mind him," Sara whispered to them. "He's just crotchety."

She went back inside five minutes later to find him scowling at his phone. "Do you know they've invented ten more lethal viruses? And they're going to unleash them on us one by one over the next fifty years, until the population of the world is reduced by forty percent!"

"Are they indeed," said Sara. "I'm going to the greenhouse to water the plants. Do keep an eye on the cake

in the oven, won't you? If you turn it off in another fifteen minutes it should be – Aun!"

"What? Oh, the cake. Yes, yes, I'll do that," He said, and went on reading. Sara sighed and went out.

She returned half an hour later to the burning smell she had more than half expected, and to the charred ruins of her morning's work on the kitchen table. "You forgot the cake!"

"Well, I –The zombie apocalypse is upon us, and you're worried about cake?"

"Zombies eat brains, don't they?" asked Sara.

"Yes, they – Why?" Aun looked up at last.

"Well, there's a silver lining for you then," said Sara, crumbling an edge of the burnt cake. The birds at least would be eating well that afternoon. "They're unlikely to trouble you very much."

Yeşil Atlar

Horses are not green. You don't exist. There are no such things as green horses. But I see you standing there, my green, green, green, green horses, with just a touch of brown where your hooves meet the gravel. At first I told everyone about you, strangers and unstrangers alike. But each time they laughed you faded a little, you aged a little, you became a little less green. Now I tell them nothing, because you don’t exist, voyons. Horses are not green. Do you hear me, green horses? There is no such thing as you.

Y U Like Dis

"We do have one reservation," The voice, hitherto mellifluous behind the smile the 'still buffering' loopy arrow had blurred to a snarl, crispened suddenly, and I straightened up. "During a quick glance through your Facebook activity – standard company procedure, nothing personal – our psychoanalysts found a disturbing number of memes about drinking at work. 'The best thing about vodka is that it looks like water'. 'Sober work day? What's that?' And so on."

"They're – memes. I don't actually drink. I just share the memes because they're funny."

"So you have never been drunk at work?"

"No. I have never been drunk at all."

"If that is indeed true," the video buffering lets up just enough to reveal a classic eyebrow lift of incredulity, the kind that could be meme-template gold. "I'm not sure it's a recommenda – that is to say – well, why are they funny then?"

"Sorry?"

"Why do you find drunk at work memes funny if you don't drink?"

The CV – smooth sailing, even a compliment or two. The covering letter and standard interview questions – no problems, vibes of approval. Was I really going to lose my dream-job because of my taste in memes?

"I – I don't – I don't know. Movies and things, I suppose. They're – they're just memes!"

"Social media activity, like other forms of self-expression, is often more – revealing – than we like to admit. For instance, I notice that you did not add #StayAtHome to your profile during the Covid19 crisis.

Were you perhaps reticent about the measures taken to prevent the spread of the disease?"

"No! The only time I left the house was to – wait, how is any of this relevant?"

"We take digital footprints very seriously in this organisation. Yesterday, you retweeted a video, originally shared by a left-wing political organisation, about reducing MP benefits to combat the recession rather than increasing the work week. Would you describe yourself as a communist?"

Reader, they gave me the boot ... Besides doing our taxes and fighting off would-be assaulters, here's another essential life-skill school never taught us … selfing through tech.

Xanthodontous

'Older people are quite likely to become xanthodontous even if they do brush their teeth.'

This observation, muffled by a phone-and-hair shield, left me a little nonplussed, until I realized it needed no response because it asked nothing of me, but was simply so many words shared, like waves of the pine air-freshener sprayed liberally about the house. The children were always generous with their words, proffering them as another generation once did tea, but in writing them down they did scrimp alarmingly on vowels. Indeed I had begun to wonder if English too would one day need accents to be understood, or perhaps, like the traditional Tifinagh alphabet, need no vowel-markers at all.

Perhaps then Dysania would learn to write her words down too, the secret ones, in that consonant-code more confidential than our meticulously phonetic writing could ever hope to be. Perhaps then the story of the secret words would at last have an ending. Every morning, the water dripped down from the neighbours' cherry tree onto the steel roof of the car shed, clanging like rain-drops in the din of the early morning. Every morning her scream rose with the sound of the glasses breaking, as the shards crushed into her eyes, blinding her, as the boots plunged into her skull, drowning her in her own blood. Every morning she dreamed of freeing the scream trapped in her throat, of her flailing punches making crushing contact, of wild triumphant laughter and the secret words shouted joyously through the trees.

The children asked her questions, but learnt nothing from the answers.

'Are the words worth the nightmares?'

‘They are words of valour and of hope. They are worth everything.’

‘What are they? You never do say.’

‘I cannot.’

‘Why ever not? There’s no censor here, you know.’

‘No,’ She smiles ‘There is no censor here. The censor lives within me now.’

‘I don't get it.’

‘God grant that you never do understand!’

So Dysania Fudgel went on dying in her dreams. Each day she died of a new thing, died in the kitchen and the garden, in the valley of apple-blossoms and in the cradle of the sea … died all kinds of deaths, all of them together, and then woke up laughing, because how could all of them come true? And then she saw the pen and paper I always left there, and somehow her hand began to write it, all of it, all the dying. But her pen stopped there. She never wrote the secret words.

‘Xylophone’ Shall Henceforth Be Spelt –

“The door was locked. I could not see them, but,” The Xylophone stopped to collect its bars. “I could hear them laughing at me.

“‘What a funny old word,’ said the little boy. ‘Eksy, eksylo something.’

“‘Not eksylo, silly,’ said the little girl. ‘Zylo. Zylophone. It’s a Z sound.’

“‘Then why isn’t it spelt with a Z?’

“‘Well, I suppose because – because – they had to have a word that begins with X for the ABC book, didn’t they?’

“They began to laugh. Your Honour, I appear in every ABC book in the land, and all the children mock my spelling. May it please the court, then, to decree that my name be spelt henceforth with a Z!”

“Well, sir,” asked Judge Music. “Who did first spell you with an X, and why? Surely it was not to fill in the ABC book!”

“Well, the child was right,” rasped the Violin, who had lost its plectrum again. “They do need a word spelt with X for the ABC books.”

“My name is a neologism dating back to the eleventh century,” said the Xylophone, trying to maintain an expression of respectful dignity while simultaneously glowering at the sniggering instruments around him. “A happy union of the Greek roots for wood and sound – Xylo and Phon. For centuries my hardwood ancestors have rejoiced in the noble appellation. I, Your Honour, being made, alas! of gaudily-painted plastics –”

“Order! Order in the court!” Thundered the Judge, signalling the Drum to drown out the laughter. “The Lyres will now retire to deliberate.”

"I say, old thing," said the Zither to the Xylophone, as the Lyres rose. "Are you really going to change your spelling?"

"I certainly hope so. You don't know how lucky you are, being spelt like all the other Z sounds! No one makes fun of you."

"Oh, if only I were the one spelt with an X!" sighed the Zither. "Then I would be in all the ABC books, and children would look at me in wonder and merriment. Now wouldn't that be amazing?"

"In-deed!" said the Xylophone. "Well, if we offer them an exchange, it would certainly remove the ABC book objection, wouldn't it? … Your Honour, I would like to lay another proposition before the court …"

Afterwards, when the Lute sang the story, it went like this:

I wish I were spelt with a Z, said the Xylophone to the Zither

I wish I were spelt with an X, said the Zither to the Xylophone

So they went to Judge Music, to move the Z hither, the X thither:

But the judge knocked their heads together, and sent them both home!

The Xylophone tried three times to have the lute unstrung for calumny, bad rhyming, and wrenching metre, but the Zither was so happy to have its own song that it sang louder than all the rest and quite forgot to be miserable at being spelt with a commonplace Z.

Winter

The rich, ripe corn spilled out of its austere sheaves, the bright yellow cobs brushing gently along the shoulders of all who trod the narrow cart-road. They stretched away to the Eyrlyndyne in a myriad waving, whispering rows, simmering green and glorious gold. Scare-crows leered in vain. Upon their straw-heads, their stick-arms, their stump-legs – nay, even in the malignant eye-sockets and the crooked mouth the indomitable chirpers fluttered, pecking complacently at the spoils of their latest foray. At every thud and rustle they rose cackling and squawking and shrilling their outrage …It was lilting and swaying and rippling in the sun, like harps and bird-song and river-music, wrapt in one long sea of love and light.

Slowly, reluctantly, the crimson sun sank behind the snow clad peaks, darkening the world. Night stripped its fire, layer after layer, from the snow-hardened peaks of the mountains, from the mellower slopes coaxed into terraces, from the roaring river. Ripple by ripple, they faded, leaving their voices behind to haunt the new world beneath the velvet-mantled sky. The rhythmic whisper of the trees persisted, and the clamour of the water as it dashed itself again and again on stubborn rock. Diamonds scattered upon the black cloak of the night, the stars began to sparkle boldly, lighting the last of the flocking birds home.

High, beyond the ken of the Kani, the skies of the Ves ni Talori began to fret and rumble. Too long had they smiled upon the eager mountains straining every nerve to mingle with them, the lush valleys sparkling and radiant, the raucous river – they were astir now, and wrathful. Virgin snow effaced rock and tree, cave and shelter, erased brown

and green and grey, leaving behind an unsmudged mantle of white. The Valuné found its pettish plaints choked under the onslaught, found its leaping and bounding waters stunned to still hard ice. The skies thundered and roared, launching their fury upon the cowering world.

To Caledorne, safe upon its broad-bosomed, chuckling Eyrlyndyne, the few gusts that seeped past its twice-curtained fortress of hills brought the veriest chill, the first hint of sky-sheathing cloud. Moonlight danced in and out of the wind-ruffled trees, beckoning and alluring, turning the placid gardens and fluttering cornfields into a forest of mystery where shadows and half-shadows chased each other in a sinuous, serpentine dance.

Why Don't You Open Up More ?

In my dreams my house holds my childhood sacred and safe; in life it has eroded to a phantom of its former self. It left one fridge-magnet, one chair, one curtain, one carpet at a time, until the house I live in and the house I dream in became two different spaces. When I tell you I have suddenly stumbled into this knowledge and am pierced by it as with ice-shards in the heart, you laugh. Then, seeing that I remain serious, you shrug awkwardly and turn to speaking of the fine spring weather. If I had told you: 'an old friend just died of a long illness, and I am having dreams…', you would have understood at once, and said all the proper things. We have so much sympathy for disaster, for it forces itself upon our consciousness and our conscience; but for the gradual erosion that blights and desertifies we have no eyes and no ears.

Vendetta

"I'll wedge between the digits and pinch the web. When he squirms, I'll blister him!"

"That's a bit extreme?"

"He went for a run when he knew I was fraying. I ripped open, he went on running. Torn as I was" Sock gulped. "He hung me out to dry!"

Unblocked

We were eating eggs because we were tired, and because there were no unwashed knives in the kitchen. No knives, no spoons, no plates, no forks; but eggs you can crack on the edge of a table for frying, or just boil and gobble up.

We were eating eggs, and I said 'I have the most terrible case of writer's block'.

'Then you should probably wash the dishes,' said my friend. 'They say it helps.'

I looked at the sink, overflowing with perilously stacked cutlery. 'Oh, it does, it does! Look, I am writing.'

Under Pressure

The little poem-seeds float in like driftwood, knocking upon my brain's grey doors, and find them shut by a self-induced frenzy. Shakespeare wrote King Lear, Newton the Principia, and I'm bingeing on chips and fantasy series, or cleaning, or washing things, or pulling another ice-cream out of the fridge, because the dead don't get ice-cream; might as well eat as much of it as I can. Inside my head an admonishing voice martels on: "If I might die, if you might die, if we might die, if anyone can die not of some vague anything at some vague anytime but of this, today or tomorrow or next week, is this really what you want to spend your last days on? You should be thinking profound thoughts and writing meaningful things, not mentally justifying eating more chocolate and imagining the broken shells of the eggs you're omeletting writing 'alas, we failed …' letters to the mother hen!"

The little poem-seeds blink up at me, hurt and puzzled to find no welcoming pen, and wondering greatly to watch me slash thus at my own sanity. But, little poem-seeds, all of my life has been spent under a pressure to do more, be more, to squeeze meaning into each minute. You I snatched up furtively, as a guilty pleasure squirrelled into stolen moments. Now there is an abyss of time before me, and one great dread to mire me in it: that I have nearly no time left at all. So I scurry about looking for familiar worries. If I open my heart to you, the fear will ride on the wings of your shoots or seep in under your roots. So lie dormant a little longer, little poem-seeds. For now I must isolate myself from you too.

Until There Was Nothing Left To Cut

Slowly, lock by tumbling lock, she let her hair glide down her shoulders. Rich, black, mane-like, it snuck its snarly bristles into her bare chest and into the raw shin of her back.

Inside the locked, shuttered, mirrorless store-room, with shrouded caskets on every side of her, she shrank still, shrank instinctively within herself as she stepped out of the black frock with its one white frill on the collar.

She knelt upon the faded black cotton, the razor blade a silver glimmer in her pudgy fingers. There ought to have been some pathos to this moment, she thought desperately, some thrill, some deep overwhelming emotion …

When Slumber took the first few strands of hair and yanked them until her head throbbed right down to her left temple and she could feel the pores of her skin ready to pop. She laid the razor against the root of the pain and struck it away. And the cool hardness of the metal was a balm to her keening new-shorn flesh.

She watched the first few strands slide off her thighs and coil up on the black cotton frock with one end swathing the white frill … And then her shingled hair began to fall around her thick and fast, like a cloud reminded of its destiny by the first plopping drop of rain.

Now she was panting a little with the pain, and her eyes glittered cruelly, feverishly. With every strand of hair she hacked off, the desperate triumph in her eyes was stoked to a blaze again.

Until there was nothing left to cut. The hair down her neck was not hers any longer: merely an irritant to be jerked off. The rush of about her weightless head, bobbing on her neck like a child's balloon at the end of a thread

made her look down suddenly at the sliver of steel in her bloodless fingers; and as the pain in her sore skin subsided, she began for the first time to survey the dark maelstrom about and upon her with the beginnings of panic.

The Adventures of the Chunaché Family

Here we shall write the adventures of the Chunaché Family, being composed at this date of Kyunké, Halanké and Goyaké Chunaché. They descended into the Faevelt by night, in a hired ox-cart, and settled in the little tile-roofed cottage at the end of the winding path that leads upward from Zéloc Vale.

Who were they, these hawk-nosed sisters and their lazily smiling brother, strangers whose grandfathers we did not know? We the people of Zéloc were a laughing race, known throughout the Faevelt for our valour and our beauty, for the richness of our soil and for the sweetness of our songs.

Into our midst came these wheat-skinned strangers, tall and silent and aloof, responding to our eager questions with cool monosyllabic replies, smiling always, yet so coldly that their smiles drove us away faster than any ill-humour could ever have done. Hastiness of temper is doubtless a grievous fault, but an endearing one nonetheless; these sad proud smiles with a hint always of unpalatable irony within them – these we did not understand. They chilled us and drove us entirely away.

And yet, today when we of the Faevelt write these chronicles of the Chunaché, we write of them in some sort as our people, our kin, our own kind, despite their dark skin and their alien ways. For fifty years they dwelt among us, and we did not know them. Now that they are dead, we begin to know of them.

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Once upon a time there was a shepherd boy who spent his days sitting on a hillside watching the village sheep. One day, he saw a wolf, and instantly he began to yell "A Wolf! Help! A Wolf is chasing the sheep! Hellllppp!"

The villagers came running, armed with sticks and axes, and drove the wolf away. 'Good work!' They said to the boy. "Thanks to you, our sheep are safe!".

The village was so was proud of him that his fame began to spread throughout the countryside, especially after the wolf came a second time, and the sheep were saved once more because the boy promptly raised the alarm. Now in the forest near the village dwelt a band of robbers, and soon the story came to their ears as well.

One day, the leader of the robbers crept up on the shepherd boy. "Cry 'wolf'!" He ordered "Cry 'wolf', or I'll slit your throat!"

The boy began to scream "Wolf! Wolf" with all his might, and of course the villagers turned out armed to the teeth. At the very last moment the robber took to his heels, leaving the terrified boy standing next to the tranquilly grazing sheep.

The villagers glared at him. "Well? Where's the wolf?".

"Over – there – down – man – knife!" gasped the poor boy. It took them a few minutes to calm him down, get the whole story from him and figure out the scam, so by the time they made it back to the village, the robbery was well underway.

The villagers rushed in upon the robbers and drove them off. The robbers had taken most of the valuable things in the village with them and seriously injured half a

dozen people, besides smashing and upturning and destroying everything in their path.

The boy, who was still sitting upon the hillside with the sheep, knew nothing of all this. But among the villagers there was a murmur already rising that soon turned into a chorus of indignant voices: the shepherd boy was in league with the robbers!

Once they had decided upon this to their satisfaction, they dragged him down the hill, beating him up in the process, and at dawn on the third day, hanged him from the tallest tree.

The Desert River

Chafing at its narrow levees, smashing upon and barging through stone, the Valuné leapt into the Cundrie Hills, easing out as the land softened. Lithe despite its bulk, humming, it inundated the dips and basins cradled between eternally verdant hills, crooning to them of beauty and splendour beyond the wildest swish of their most wilful grasses. Lavishing its abundance upon lake and affluent and ox-bow, it glided out of the land of plenty, and trickled to the crock-shaped hollows where began the Pyetivant Mista. Screened from the mountains by hillocks and mounds increasingly dour sprawled stretches of eroding, crumbling rock, sucked up grain by grain into the insidious sands lapping about them. Only the gnarled stubs and stubble that slashed across, nursed by the Valuné's clogged trickle, circumvented their gluttony.

Chugging its crippled way to the sea, the Valuné gave still with reckless abandon to every channel gouged out of the searing semi-desert, each bubbling rivulet tapering hopefully off. Guarded sedulously by the unquenchable cacti and the occasional stately date-palm some made it to the perpetually wilting fields; others, outstripping their escort, darted rashly desert ward, and were pounced on and strangled.

The Dreams of a Young Girl

Sleek and lithe, she bounded forward, the slanting feline eyes glowing like emeralds against the silken darkness of her glossy black fur. Her razor-sharp teeth glinted in the moonlight, but the cruelly curved claws were sheathed, and the padded paws fell steadily and harmoniously on the murmuring grasses. She ran on into the silence, the thrill of the hunt quivering in every muscular curve of her splendid form.

And I was she, and she was I…we were one…

One like predators driven fey by the luscious scent of prey.

Then the Sylvan night of which she was Queen transformed into a world of chuckling streams and rustling roses and choirs of birds twittering as they flitted from tree to tree. And into this beautiful world came one with delicate wings spread elegantly out behind her, clad in silver-threaded green gilded by the sun, warm and welcoming. She smiled sweetly upon the whole world, from the birds chirping audaciously about her head to the bunnies peeping timidly from their burrows.

And I was she, and she was I…we were one.

One like those with hearts full of contentment and sweet joy.

Over snow-tipped mountains and lush valleys she soared, mistress of the sky, leader of the beautiful white sisterhood, unrivaled in grace among these lovingly-crafted miracles of nature. The wind itself was her servant and accomplice; she sailed on it whither she wished.

And I was she, and she was I…we were one.

One as only the truly free can be.

The ocean, rippling serenely under the bright blue sky, held naught lovelier than her cascading raven locks, her trim figure, her flashing, interlocking fins…She dove in and out of the water, splashing the staid old turtle who crawled ponderously on the sea bed. She rode the surf fearlessly, floating effortlessly on the crests of the waves, shaking out her tangled curls, her eyes laughing, laughing…

And I was she, and she was I…we were one.

One like the sea and sky mingling at the horizon.

She leant out of the high, forbidding tower, her hair fluttering behind her, a rich russet cloak for her lace-draped shoulders. Her hands were clenched on the guardrail, her eyes wide and dreamy, thirsting, longing… but it was not at the feast spread out in the lawn below that they stared, the feast that heralded the dawn of her sixteenth year. They passed indifferently over the lords and ladies promenading, the ambitious scions of poorer houses buzzing around them, using the fete to build up their own connections. They were fixed on the dark, mysterious forest beyond the distant Palace gates… from which her Prince would ride to her one day…

And I was she and she was I…we were one.

One like two hearts that await the same tread.

The flames ate into the last of the pine-cones, burning the dreams in it to cold, impotent ash, as it had all the cones that had come before and all that would come after.

But they would not die. The panther. The fairy. The swan. The mermaid. The woman-child who waited dewy-eyed for her Prince. They would live on.

In me. In the innermost chambers of my fancy they would dwell, verdant for ever and ever and evermore.

The Fall

Hrothgar Valinaryon was a bit of a jerk.

From the first it was evident to the canny that the fall of the House of Valinaryon was at hand. The new King was neither properly cruel nor respectably dissipated. In defiance of all precedent, he would hold none of the dusk to dawn orgies that had enlivened his ancestors' reigns, and bored the poor court to distraction. Likewise, in lieu of running after every female between six and sixty, he treated all the court ladies with propriety and distant respect, thereby earning their righteous wrath.

Seven and twenty years of age found him a staid married man, devoted to his wife, his dinner and his chessboard. To the consternation of his chief Awenyd, who ran the country while he dandled his son on his knee and mooned after Queen Matilda, he even eschewed the Royal sport of 'banish-people-and-confiscate-their-money', which had kept the Royal Treasury satisfyingly full for generations. He taxed the people equitably, and thereby affronted them mortally.

Moreover, he had an implacable objection to hanging, beheading and impaling people for public amusement. Had he complied with this very just desire of a populace suffering from ennui, as his well-wishers tactfully advised, he would doubtless have been Beloved.

He did not. When King Hrothgar felt grumpy or out of sorts – and his temper grew shorter as his girth increased – he made people stand on their heads, tickled them with goose-feathers, or had them dunked in the Palace Pond. Wherefore he was Bemoaned.

In death with Honour those of Noble birth find Glory, and imperishable renown. Penurious Exile theirs is the

privilege of Enduring; the Suffering of blue blood sely folk deem hallowed. These serve but to render their Names illustrious, especially if tangled somehow with War – that single syllable more potent than the purest opiates to banish kind-wit and set blood and land aflame. But who can command the unquestioning adulation of a mob that has seen him with bare legs, quivering high in the air, his head squelching as he flounders red-faced in the mud? Or roll on dank grass, shrieking and squealing, and then thunder forth to evict unruly tenants? As for being sat down plump in icy slime, that is, as any creature of sensibility must realise, not only incompatible with all pretensions to sartorial elegance, but dashed expensive too.

So, you see, King Hrothgar did most rashly Seal his own Doom.

It happened like this. One dismal winter evening, his cousin and Chief Torturer, Prince Raimund, forgot himself so far as to checkmate His Majesty six blitz games in a row. The storm-clouds gathering on the August Brow might still have been dispelled by circumspect behaviour. But it was quarter day, and Ray had received his allowance that very morning. The celebration of this happy event – evidence of which was borne away at intervals by a sombre, wooden-faced individual – had induced in the gentleman a somewhat frolicsome humour.

He poured the remains of his glass neatly over the Royal Leg, just as King Hrothgar was conducting Queen Matilda to dinner, and promptly offered to escort her instead. So that His Most Serene Highness Prince Raimund was Her Majesty's cavalier for the Feast and the State Ball afterwards, while King Hrothgar fumed and cursed and smashed vases. His flabbergasted attendants swathed an

invisible scratch on his knee in a sea of lint and tried in vain to find attire that would suit their master's suddenly fastidious taste.

Raimund got all three, to no one's surprise. First he had to head-stand in full view of the sniggering Court until the King's finest tomatoes envied him his complexion. Then he was tickled from head to toe before the same delighted audience, and tossed into the Pond six-times-six in succession.

Small wonder that he went home smouldering, and swore vengeance with a pungency that moved his lackeys to unfeigned awe. It required little effort to find others who were sore and disgruntled; every one about the King's Person had undergone much the same ordeal. Most at Raimund's own hands – but that was a detail they delicately shelved, as became Gentlemen engaged upon a Plan of which he was the Mastermind.

They exchanged mysterious signals, messages and tokens to an extent calculated to madden those not in the know; gathered on deliciously perilous rooftops, in cellars and on deserted mounds to spout bad verse and worse rhetoric over sandwiches and hot chocolate, and set each other absurd dares. After two weeks, half a dozen duels and a broken collarbone or so, this began rather to pall, and Raimund decided it was time to dashed well do something.

So the next morning they knocked out the guards at the door of the Royal Bedchamber and kicked Hrothgar out of the window. Queen Matilda, presented on the traditional bended knee with an artificial peony from her own table-dormant, was given a Choice.

For all her coquetting and philandering, Matty was quite genuinely fond of her husband – and fonder of melodrama. So she punched Raimund in the gut and scratched his face, screeching that he was a squint-eyed, frog-legged, roach-hearted baboon. Upon which he threw her out too, and when she set up a squawk, chucked down Baby Herethric for her to catch. Then he threw all of his gang one whale of a party.

Ensued a lot of squabbling over who would next become King. Finally, the Chief Awenyd declared himself sick and tired of the whole wrangling crew, and locked them up, along with Hrothgar, in the remote Castle of Onfroi. On the throne he put a bookish princeling of an insignificant branch family.

Queen Matilda and Herethric had vanished, but he attempted no more than a token search. He then fired two-thirds of the Royal Entourage, and heartened immensely by the cut in expenditure, resolved to dwell no more on the absurd farce. By way of further catharsis, he gave himself up to the invention of a staggering new tax.

The Foreignest Of Them All

Write a mémoire in your language, and it says: "Out, ye autres who know naught of my world!" Write it in a foreign one, and it says to your own world: "I have bled ye dry to water my words, stript the flesh from your bones to feed them meaning. Now hence, bare withered husk, for these my words shall repose in other soils." When you write it in all deux trois quatre langues à la fois, however, you place upon your work a lock jo translation se bhi pura nahi khulna. And then you because your way out using authenticity and whatnot, but is that not even more unfair? A question that invites another: fair to whom? Am I reflexively doing the colonial thing of tea-straining my culture for a more 'mainstream' audience, or is it merely that a history of colonisation is making me paranoid?

If we switch codes because one tongue alone will not hold all of the truths of our many layered world, kiyunke jo cheezain hoti hi nahi hain siwaye eik language mein unhain bolo ge kaisay beghair unki wali ke, how do I suddenly distill them all into grimly academic French? How do I write about our whacko baffling code-mishmash in just one language, and that the foreignest language of them all? Mais peut-etre that is the only one that will hold it, the language votre and autre at the same time, the one resolutely alien yet beloved? Puisque the first time that you don't have to consciously translate or remember any words or phrases, the first time the whole just leaps into words straight from your mind – the moment that happens in a langue, it is no longer quite étrangère: it begins to be yours, just a little, and to sink its roots into your heart. In that way, le français c'est ma langue aussi. Mais it is not the langue of my mother and my father and my patrie, it is

not the langue of the story-worlds I grew up in, nor yet of the poesies that most deeply stir my blood. It is also the language of La Force and carries the taint upon it still.

Within one language, poems are word-paintings that pin wick fragments to boards in linguistic formaldehyde, story-histoires tell us what could have or should have or would have happened if the world had been looked at a certain way by a certain kind of creature, and essais are either immortal hybrids or mere raw-drafts of those, shivering and dying in the woods. But when languages criss-cross, when they slash and splash each other's textes, là, alors, qu'est-ce qui se passe? Is it a grand bataille of foes locked in an eternal trench-war, wresting and yielding every inch with blood? Or is it simply the casual uninvited dropping into each other's houses of very old friends? And maybe, just maybe, not explaining your existence to an uncomprehending public is the one sure way of understanding it yourself?

The Freshly Felled Tree

The tree-branch bobbed past the window, scarcely higher than the sill, its leaves shushing the recalcitrant grass that sprang upright again in its wake. It lurched as it moved onto the path, and idly she wondered if it would unyoke the ragged ridge of bone straining to thrust it up. As the ten-toed spindles upon which the whole mass was perched spun scrabbling for a firmer hold upon the dust, a rough draft of a human face emerged above the leaves. Beside its bones almost uncoated with flesh, beside its cracked skin and leaden eyes, a trick of the light cast her own double-chinned shadow onto the window-pane, and for the first time in her life, she felt upon her soul the cold grey weight of an oxygen debt.

The Harvest

"They will yield a fine harvest," rustled Father Oak to Mother Maple. "Fur-less, they strip other animals; claw-less, they fashion stone claws, to hunt their prey and one another!"

"Fratricides!" Mother Maple withdrew from the creature, horrified. "Cast them out now, say I!"

"Nonsense! We shall nourish them well, so that they may ripen quickly."

"If they turn their claws upon us –"

"Oh they won't do that. They know they die the day we do."

"Well, I hope you're right." Sighed Mother Maple, and lowered her branches to the feeble paws reaching up for her leaves.

The Hounds of Kazun

She ran faster than the wind that gashed her ashen face, than the hail that weighed down her whorl of fiery hair. She ran on through blinding mist, on naked feet numbed and torn, and so deep were the spurs driven into her frantic heart that she never stayed to draw breath.

One slender arm clasped her whimpering child to her chest; the other was stretched gropingly before her as she fought her way into the gathering darkness. The flint-flecked eyes of the sea's own green, fashioned for generous warmth and fecund laughter, were stark with the same indomitable resolve that clenched her fists and hardened the little cloven chin. No thought had she now of the heart-breaking past or of the fresh sorrow that thrashed within her like a netted lion.

The world had narrowed into a single, eternal purpose: safeguarding her son from the hounds hard upon her sore-pressed heels. For hours now she had eluded them, in this land of dour rock blighted utterly by a madman's curse. An alien land of vicious broken rock, masked by a glaze of treacherous snow that stained bright red as the rocks worried themselves into her foot-soles. There was no shelter here, no cover, no respite; when she faltered, her child would die.

The dogs sniffed eagerly at the blood prints in the snow and bounded forward with renewed vigour. They were gaining on the woman, their slavering fangs bared, and despair clawed at her very soul as the barking quickened.

The cliffs were a darkness upon the horizon, the spires of the village more felt than seen, when, she fell at last, spent, shielding the babe she had cocooned in fur beneath her own frail body. She struggled upright ere the dogs

closed in, but to no avail; her legs would no longer serve. And with a mighty roar the leader of the leashless pack, aquiver with fiendish blood-lust, sprang at her throat.

Her eyes flashed upward like scythes. At the very last moment she spun aside and, cradling the child underneath her with her left arm, shoved her right between the razor sharp teeth. There was a sickening crunch and a spurt of blood as they embedded: and then the sharp tearing of cloth as the arm was ripped bodily off. Stunned, uncomprehending, she crumpled into the snow, broken between horror and memory and anguish.

Then the world became an agony of flame and an unending, pain-drenched scream.

The List

The ship was swaying too much to read without getting a headache and Klytie Dunthair had fallen asleep on top of her dolly. She was too much of a scaredy-kitten to be much fun anyhow, so when I was stuffed full of the ship's crumbly cupcakes, I snuck up under Aunty's table to listen. She was still munching away on the biscuits, though her newly-acquired to-be-dumped-as-soon-as-we-docked friend Mrs Dunthair contented herself with punctuating sips of tea with soulful sighs.

"They should not let Ilken on passenger ships," Aunty Merinantha was saying, in that flushed squeaky way she has when she is annoyed. "I spoke to the Captain and he is most unhappy about it. They have a list, of course, but it still isn't safe. In Enalton I heard there was a boy they let in last month who …" The Ilken-Knilde, the fang-blooded clans of the Ryokoi … Their voices sank to low whispers, as people's voices always did when they talked about them, and I could not hear them however close I drew. So I decided to try naïve curiosity instead.

"Are we stopping somewhere, Aunty? Who's coming on board?"

"Bless the child!" exclaimed Mrs Dunthair as my head popped out, falling back upon her cushions in a half-faint, though without spilling a drop of her tea.

"No one," said Aunty sharply. "How many times have I spoken to you about this nasty habit of eavesdropping, Aziantha? You will go down to your cabin and remain there until I tell you otherwise. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Aunty," I said meekly and fled, resolving of course to do nothing of the kind.

The day dragged on through the sweltering heat, and I fell into a real doze in my hammock, from which the landing-blasts of the horn yanked me awake. Aunty was safely nodding over her knitting in the lounge, and I climbed up to our almost-deserted deck, dodging the gauntlet of heads craning out of something or the other.

Slowly I crept closer along the rim of the ship for a look at the dreaded Ilken, with their ash-coloured hair and their startling blue-green eyes standing out vividly in high-boned reddish faces. Grotesque, misshapen savages with noses hooked like hawks, they said, fang-blooded creatures who could shoot poisoned pine-needles from their palms … The very worst of the fang-blooded were the dread spell-weavers with fire-tinged hair, like the girl staring at me from the cliff, holding up her little brother so that he could see too. I was too fascinated to be scared and matched her stare for stare, and so without a wave or even a smile we became friends.

In the berth next to ours there was another ship, surrounded by crewmen with quarterstaves just as ours was beginning to be, holding off the horde of people stretching all the way back to the thrice-curtained ruin of the Last Castle. Here they were scattered and crumpled upon the flint-sand beach like a bouquet mussed underfoot by careless children, and none of them shot poisoned needles, not even when a sailor pushed a little girl back and made her cry.

At the rim of the land they were forming a kind of ragged line, and my witch-friend was in it too, holding the little boy's hand and helping along an old lady. The captain was tacking up a huge scroll that dipped past his

knees, scratching out names as he let a thin trickle of them onto our ship, one by one, forcing the rest back.

The first people they let on were the family of the little girl the sailor had hit. She was tugging at her mother's skirt and saying over and over "Where's Asrai, Mama? Isn't he coming too?" And the mother, in that singsong I-am-lying-to-you-but-you-will-believe-me falsetto my Aunt always drops into when talking about my parents, prised her away … "Oh yes, darling, but his family is on the other ship, the one over there. When we reach the Kinshuredor you can play with him again." She was still half a baby, and even now at fifteen I would not dare to ask questions of that voice.

Anyway, I had my eyes scrunched on the witch-girl just then. Everyone was backing away from her family, even the other Ilken-people, but she walked right past them without flinching. She glanced up at me, though neither of us gave so much as a nod, bound by some mutually-understood agreement of secrecy.

They were too busy to notice me as I wormed my down through the Ilken and the sailors to the captain with his list, only just in time for her turn. The little boy from the cliff was clinging to her skirt and on her other arm she was propping up a trembly old-faced lady.

"Philliantha Amakuri" The woman with her rasped. "This is my son Nyrfael, and – my daughter, Lyrderi. I know you have us on your list."

The captain frowned his way down the scroll, and back up again. "We have you and your son, but there is no daughter listed," he said.

“There must be a mistake in your list. She is my daughter, I swear it!” And then of course everyone knew she was not.

“Philliantha Amakuri – you are the wife of Caél Amakuri, are you not? Offered refuge in exchange for valuable information.” The distaste in the Captain’s voice made her cringe, but she shuffled forward and fastened herself to his hand.

“Aye, I’m a traitor,” She whispered. “I betrayed my own people, the vilest crime on the face of the earth. Yet I did not do it – for – for money, or – I meant to stop this, you see, I thought if I could warn them in time no one would have to die… They promised – they promised no harm would come ... scorn me all you will, I have deserved it. But this child – she is innocent, and good. She saved my boy’s life. We had no food and no one would help us – who would sully themselves with a traitor? ... She is only half Ilken, you know, her father was an Ephelain, and she could have stayed if she had not looked so much like her mother, but they won’t listen, they will kill her now if they see her. You wouldn’t let a good, kind, innocent child die, would you, Captain? Please, let her come … ”

“Unfortunately, she is not on the list, unlike you and your spawn.” Snapped the captain, shaking her off. “Get on or get ye hence, I care not.”

I was looking at Lyrderi – everyone was, except the captain. She was looking only at me, and I swallowed hard again and again to snuff the war of the voices inside my head. “Say something, do something …” “Like what? They won’t listen to me, and if Aunty finds out …” To this day I do not know what else I could have done, could have been in that moment, and to this day the guilt of a craven silence

more contemptible than any overt treachery poisons my heart, although there was nothing accusing in those flint-flecked eyes of the sea's own green; instead, for the first time, she was smiling, and as distinctly as if she had said it I could feel in her the echo of my own absurdly trivial regret that we would never really get to know each other.

Gently she drew her arm away from the woman and knelt down beside the little boy, who was clutching her gown with both hands, too old to cry, too young to do anything else. She detached the gown, flicked his hair back from his forehead, pulled a little whittled scare-crow doll from her pocket and gave it to him, and then turned around and ran, as though all the clubs on the quay were aimed at her head.

They pulled the limp weeping woman on board, and the little boy. As she arced around to the cliffs and out of sight, the grim reserve he had set upon himself broke and he began to cry, screaming after her "Come back! Come back! Take me with you! Deri! Deri! Come back!"

I scanned the crowds for her, like her not-quite-brother beside me gripping the scarecrow-doll. All through the sunset we watched, until the last name on the list was crossed off. They began to pull draw up the ropes, hoist the sails – and then, over all the commotion, the crying and the wailing and the shouting and the creaking, rose a clear whistling song from the cliffs.

A hush had fallen now upon the very wind, and we were all of us gazing up at her. There she was, my witch-friend, Lyrderi Ephelain, waving from the cliff, head held high, fiery hair flying in the wind, forsaken unto almost certain death but still with courage enough still to share with us who were sailing away to life and safety.

The Meat-Poison Cliché

"And so it was that Smith realised, after years uncounted in the wilderness, that putting mayonnaise on roast beef was wrong. It had come to him slowly, as slowly as oil leaking out of dinosaur bones."

The sources, I fear, are quite hopelessly lost; but I do recall that the second line is from a free self-help ebook of some sort, and the first from a writing manual which was holding it up to demonstrate how not to write. And I remember thinking to myself: 'Dear Lord, if only I could write like that, I would never again ask you for anything.' A trifle fervid perhaps, the declaration. But the meat-poison cliche does come to mind.

Messieurs-dames the self-appointed Guardians of Writing, what ye shun as meat I welcome as poison. Come, O noble rhyme, thou outcast soul of true poesy. Come, adjectives, adverbs, cliches, long sentences, trite similes, mixed metaphors; come, my dear old friend the passive voice ... Let our Last Castle be built with mangoes and chocolate and ice-cream, and endure upon that sable shore where the only ink that can whet a pen is the heart's own blood. Let it there endure, unto the calamitous day the sun rises in the West.

The Purple Moon

Ausania didn't know if it was a wonderful sign or a sign of disaster, but Ausania knew a purple moon when she saw one. And this moon was as cheerfully and blatantly purple as – well, as everything! The walls were purple, the bedspread around her a deep magenta, the bars on the window slicing up the cookie-shaped moon with delicate fuchsia cream… She looked intently into the smiling lilac crescents of her fingernails, and whispered softly, "Well, it's official now. I'm insane."

Then she stood up and smoothed her purple blanket wrinkle by wrinkle over the purple mattress, put on her purple slippers and began uncertainly to stumble around the purple-floored room on purple legs, touching the purple walls and the purple things within them with trembling purple fingers. She took the purple phone off the hook and pressed the purple redial button.

"Everything is purple," She said. "Yes, er, hi to you too. No, I'm fine. Yes, I know what time it is … Am I crazy? Yes, I'm afraid so, Lyrderi. You see, the world's gone purple."

"The world's gone WHAT?"

"It's beautiful, actually. I never knew being crazy could be so beautiful! The moon is purple and the stars are purple, and my hands are purple and the toes at the ends of my feet … no, I'm not stoned, 'deri, I'm bonkers … oh, it's a purple, purple, world out here …"

"Is that your new poem or something, then? You can't just – Even if you really did go mad the moon wouldn't turn purple just for you!"

"A new poem? No… but perhaps it could be! Not – not a real poem, maybe, but a crazy jingle … 'My word is purple' … hang on, purple doesn't rhyme … Got it!

How do you feel
When the world turns a wheel
And everything goes purple around you?
How do you feel
When you wake up to a reel
And the crazy in your world has found you?
How do you feel …"

Lyrderi laid down the receiver soundlessly beside the cradle, wrestled her sockless feet into the half-dry boots next to the door, and ran out of the house with her shawl and purse and horn-clip all caught up under her arm on the way out. Several times on her way across the road and around the corner she glanced up at the sky, at the pearl-cream moon in a decidedly black sky threaded through with pearl-cream stars hanging serenely white.

Each time she looked she jerked herself back, rated herself furiously for being a heartless idiot, but at the threshold of Ausania's house she turned back vehemently for one last hungry look, expectant and hopeful and self-scorning, like a child lifting the magic pillow as she prays for the coin she needs to appear under it … The moon was still white and shining and most emphatically not purple.

"Turn purple for me too," She whispered softly up to the moon with her finger on the doorbell, blushing in the mercifully black darkness for her words even as she spoke them. "Turn purple for me. Just once, please. Just once for a little while, turn purple for me too!

The Rebellion of Conallan Virlai

King Wenestl was a short, stout, ruddy-faced man – a caricature of a middle-aged merchant. All praised his munificence and graciousness, his wisdom and strength; did everything, in short, to keep him in a gift-bestowing land-granting mood instead of a banishing and boiling-in-oil tantrum.

But eventually someone would lose his cool, and then there'd be the devil to pay. The Virlai, especially, were ever a hot-tempered, touchy sort, and Conallan, Chieftain because he was Wenestl's oldest friend, was the worst. One day, the King, being in a funning humour, began calling him a lamppost, a beanpole, and so forth. (He was rather the long lean type) The courtiers and even the other clan-chieftains followed suit, and soon Conallan was burning with rage. He smashed his fist into the Royal Tea-Table so hard that it jumped a foot. "Shut up! With your hog's belly and blasted egg-pate –"

A sudden hush fell upon the court. All eyes were upon the King, who was swelling as though connected to a particularly industrious air-hose. "You're banished!" He screamed, throwing his sceptre at Conallan. "Get out of my Kingdom, insolent Knave!"

Conallan caught the sceptre and hurled it back. "Fine! I'm going!"

Now had the Virlai risen, or even threatened to rise in revolt, Conallan had not long been an exile. But Tivrin Virlai, his cousin, had long awaited such an opportunity, and he scotched the whole idea so effectively Conallan never even got to deliver the speech he had spent days writing. However, Conallan Virlai made no attempt to leave Nakushita. Instead, he set up camp in the Royal

Forest and nailed rebel recruitment posters to oak-trunks. In the next two months he gathered some three-score wolf's-heads to him, and breakfasted, dined and supped on roast venison a hundred and eighty-three times. Finally he decided it was time to strike, and pulled out his speech.

"Brothers! We have been insulted and exiled –"

"Have we? Oh – Hear, hear!"

"We have bonded together in this hour of travail –"

"What?"

"Let me finish! – in this hour of travail, to rid the Land of the tyrant Wenestl!"

"Hurrah!"

"And I am sick of venison!"

Shouts of 'Yeah', and 'So are we', greeted this inspired addition.

"Okay! Is't to be aye or niggardly nay?"

"What?"

"Say aye!"

"Aye!"

"Begin! We leave at daybreak, and 'tis short shrift the laggards will get!

They scattered with another resounding 'aye'. One remained. A little boy.

"Art witless, lad? Get thee gone!"

"Yes sir, but it's just–"

"Scared, fledgling?"

"No sir, but – exactly how are we going to capture the King, sir?"

"Eh? Didn't really think –I mean, it's a secret plan, dunderhead! Be off! Stay! Summon my Council! Go!"

The blacksmith suggested laming the King's horse, the cook poisoning his food, the highwayman holding him up,

the soldier digging a tunnel … by this time Conallan was quite apoplectic, but he couldn't think of anything at all himself, except for barging in and throttling everybody. Then a sleepy fisherman spoke.

"I say," He said. "Doesn't he go wall-tramping in the morning? Why don't we drag him down in a shrimp-net?"

Conallan denounced this as unfit for their glorious enterprise. But for once he was shouted down, and preparations began in earnest.

It was customary for the King to promenade the outer wall of the palace once a week, accompanied by a single guard, to demonstrate his trust in The Love of The People. They crept up to the wall without incident, and netted the King with one neat flick.

Wenestl the forty-seventh, known to an irreverent people as Wenestl the Stumpy, woke to find himself trussed up in a noisome tree-hollow. On the third day, Conallan visited him in person. He had thought to find a foe hysterical with fright and anger, and was rather disconcerted to find him consuming a hearty meal instead.

"Shame of the Valinaryon, thy end has come!" thundered Conallan, throwing off his cloak. "Death hovers over ye!"

Wenestl raised one weary eyebrow. "Didn't I banish you? Or perhaps it was some other wastrel? I forget…"

The guards giggled. Conallan had turned puce. He felt like gutting the King then and there. But that was a proceeding Honour forbade.

"I would fain spit thee as a hog! But I am generous. Take this rapier, cur, and fight me like a man!"

Wenestl tossed the rapier aside. “But I just had lunch!” He protested. “One does not duel after lunch. It is unseemly.”

“Shall I then run ye through?” demanded Conallan.

“Oh, come on, Conallan, what good would that do?”

“The land would groan no more for ye, tyrant! And,” he added wistfully. “I can go home, murder my cousin, and eat something, anything, besides this blasted venison!”

“Really? I thought it was rather good… Well, you won’t go home if you kill me.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“Ensel will become king if I die, and you can bet he won’t repeal your banishment. You fool, why the deuce didn’t you just go into exile, and then write a petition or something? I would have recalled you within the month!”

Conallan digested this. “And what am I to do now?” He demanded querulously. “Let you go, I suppose?”

“Oh please don’t. I don’t want to die just yet.”

“What? Dost mock me even here? Art in my power, foul knave -”

“Conallan, stop play-acting and listen! The net your lout threw over me – I cut the strings with the first sword-slash. I cut the strings, do you understand? It was my guard who shoved me off the wall.”

“What? Why? I didn’t bribe him, I swear!”

“Not you. Ensel, my beloved son and heir. Half your men are his spies.”

“What are we going to do now?”

Wenestl shrugged and held out his plate. “Want some?”

Conallan threw the shrimp-net at his head.

Conallan Virlai was kept in the Palace dungeons for two whole months, without bedding or change of raiment.

Yet all marvelled at the new King's ways, for the prisoner was fed most sumptuously. Naught but the finest venison would do for him.

On the sixty-second day he was run through with the rapier he had given Wenestl.

There is work to be done

– Bestir thee, O broken one, for there is work to be done.

– Aye. I am gathering up all of my selves to do it.

– All of thy selves.

– All of my selves. All that is left of my mind and my body and my heart – and my soul also. I shall gather them up now, and hurl them against the rocks of the world. I shall watch the yolk of my selves splatter, trickle down in nauseating yellow sluices.

– And then thy work is done.

– These slow-trickling sluices I shall gather up again, in old ice-cream cups, again and again and again after each hurling, until all of my selves have trickled away past all gathering. And still my work shall not be done.

The Swans

"O ugly ducklings grown into beauty, are you homesick too?"

Thus I, standing in the shadows of the House of Quasimodo, watching you glide upon these placid waters, O snow-winged sisters of my soul!

"Swans fly south for the winter" You, of whom I first read in the sun-baked plains of my homeland soaked in the scent of mangoes – in this city of eternal Autumn, you have made yourselves a second Spring.

You know not my home, O Daughters of Winter. I know not yours. Yet here the twain shall meet, Once Upon a September.

The Unceasing Plaint of The Sea

Ash-grey shafts shot out of the cliff rock, racing into the embrace of the clouds. Stone sewn seamlessly to stone, the jagged steely glitter spiralled thrice, curtaining a little piece of the earth from the hungry sea. The chain of craggy cliffs slung out along the wavering shoreline, their hoary heads held high in defiance of wind and water, splotched with egg-yolk-gold and weed-green, had once been kin to the sheer, gigantic shelf of rock that had borne the castle aloft. Fettered to the earth, they could but moan and fidget now, as they watched their gouged and blackened cousin wrestle the urge to sag wearily into the sea.

The Castle, yearning heavenwards, knew naught of the battle waged below. Ever she stood in peril of being shorn off and sent plummeting down; but the blue-white sky entwined about her tall, perforce sloping towers, and the sun that set them aglow, conspired to restrain her, to check her fall. Morn after morn, eventide after eventide they had done this, ever since the castle had first bowed her ravaged head over the sea.

Once – and the hour was well within living memory, if the living only cared to remember – once the four mighty stone towers had leapt impetuously above the silver-stone curtain, higher than the sharpest gaze could pierce. Radiant with life and laughter, the Castle sent forth a welcome her stern visage could not belie. The gallant pennants and the gay draperies, the ring of merry jests, the vigorous echoes of feet quick with joyous life had ridden out upon the sea-spray, coaxing home canoe and warship with the same ardour. But the harbour once hailed with resounding cheers lay scorched and crumpled at her feet,

desolate. And in the fickle memories of men it had been consigned already to the realm of legend.

And yet the thrice-curtained castle held her secrets still, behind the latticeshadows no sun could now leaven. Within the shrouded stone chamber the eerie green of a flickering taper flung coiling, dancing echoes of light, warring with the blue-flamed fire of Rvalenlore, shadowless and dauntless, born of cool stone and thin air. Within the sanctuary glided dark-robed wraiths, shrouded, latticed themselves, scarce breathing as they stooped over the flames and the figure cloaked within – another shadow, another wraith, spun lifeless into the flaming cocoon. Anguish lay stilled upon its marble-pallor, stilled almost to tranquillity. Black hair bounced off indifferently off the gaunt face, wormed their way into the cocoon's staring eyes. It never stirred.

An age crept by. The flame-cocoon pranced and spun, pranced and spun, swallowing the taper-echoes. The green-glowing taper, snatched up into the rising whirl, struck into its very core, suffusing it with its emerald blood.

"Llanlach Trébori!" It grated through the castle walls, a sound deeper than thunder rolling off the high sea winds; it trembled through the very heart of that blighted earth, that cry of the shadows. A gorgon, a veritable gorgon, shattered the shell, casting the limp green-doused form at her feet. The Summoner alone met her stare for stare; and for all her hideous savagery, he was the more sinister. Now they chaunted, the wraiths, a strangely soft lilting tongue that cracked and hoarsened as they vied for ascendancy. And then with one wild laugh the gorgon yielded.

"Aye!" she shrieked "A soul for a soul!"

“Behold thy hunter!”

She vanished in a whirl as dazzling as her coming, and the purple vapour streaked out, cloaking, enveloping the corpse-like form, lancing it upright. Green eyes locked with vacant black, bored into and past them with implacable ferocity.

A dove flew out of its nest in the turret above, its heart fluttering with a fear it had never before known. The kite, who had watched it hungrily since daybreak, swooped. The dove died ere its strangled scream had faded from the salt sea breeze.

And then there was silence, save for the unceasing plaint of the sea.

To-Do List

Snooze your phone once with bewilderment, then with anger, and finally with groaning resignation. Stumble out bleary-eyed and catch the bus, gulping down the chocolate-coated energy bar you made a New Year's resolution to give up. As you glare in undisguised envy at people with seats, wonder if you should buy the thirty-egg carton or the twelve-egg carton, given that the thirty-egg one always expires before you can use more than half but still costs less per egg than the twelve-egg one.

Walk into your little curtained den and hunch over the desk. Order pizza for lunch to break two more resolutions – 6) 'Go for a brisk walk during the lunch-break' and 9) 'Eat healthy salad lunches only'. Come out at nightfall, and catch the bus of envious longings again, this time to wonder if a prawn pizza counts as a kind of salad after all. See, but look quickly past the woman on the footpath staring at the sky while the child next to her bites open a chocolate with immense concentration, past the student with the piercings on her lip who is shivering as she hands out flyers, past all these people at once real and not.

Finally, trudge back up the stairs. Catch a glimpse of yourself in the landing-mirror and realise why everyone was looking at you so funnily on the bus. Your lip is bleeding – you haven't had a drink of water in hours. There goes resolution 3) 'Drink eight litres of water every day'. Open the freezer to discover you have no ice. Clean the blood with a tissue, swallow a little water, and lie down to sleep. Decide to check just your email before you turn off the light …

Tomorrow, repeat. But fill the ice-box before you run downstairs, okay?

Scarzone

When you touch the edge of something hot - a frying-pan, a clothes-iron - you gasp and flinch away, before the knowledge, before the shock and the hurt and the searing of flesh. Locked in the thumping of your heart then, there is the secret triumph of assault successfully withstood, the inexpressible comfort of knowing it could not and cannot hurt you because you did and can again make it stop. But the drenching heat of liquid cannot be flung off, only sponged and coaxed away from the skin. And so they say doodh ka jala, chhaachh bhi phook phook kar peeta hai. It doesn't take all men, you see, it takes only one; and just so, it takes only one vile lie to break a language's heart.

When first you write a lie, a real lie and not simply a truth incognito, whether it be falsehood or treacherous half-truth, language recoils from you in pain, vowing never to trust you with words again. But if you must go on writing lies, for money or for grundy-respect, seize the language and let it feel the sting and the trickling fear of the skin parting company with the flesh, over and over and over again, as you hold it unscreaming under the current. You must let body and mind and heart and soul be quite maimed then, until there is no difference left for any of them between truth and lie, between the coldness of lassi and the heat of milk-tides rising from the saucepan. Thereafter you may plunder with impunity all of language and force it to house your lies. And if you will never again find words to tell a truth in, it will not matter, for you will have no truths left to tell.

Shalt And Shalt Not

The current obsession with wrapping up and baring heads all over the world is a rather curious manifestation of the by-no-means-new tendency of some obscure 'they' or the other to go around decreeing how a woman not only should, but will dress – or else. 'Should' I can understand: everyone has the right to hold an opinion, to express it freely, and to try to convince other people of its truth. But the compulsion – this imposition of laws that turns a woman's head into a battleground between one wretched -ism and another – every time I run into a rule of this description, j'en rage.

In this regard I hold exactly equal every law that demands a woman cover her head and every law that demands she uncover it. It is her head, geniuses, and her call. – Tun kaun? Mein khamkhwa – You cannot wriggle out of this one by dragging God into it, on either side. If you do believe that He gave us guidelines, you cannot except by wilful hypocrisy deny that He also left unto all man-kind AND woman-kind the choice to follow them or not, and reserved for Himself the judgement of their conduct. And if you do not, if you outlaw a veil upon the head as a 'symbol of oppression', etc. etc. – well, you might just as well ban pants while you are about it, because – say, because the Nazis wore them – and have done with it.

Is a woman's freedom to decide whether a she winds a piece of cloth around her head or not such an impossible notion for the human race to grasp, men and women alike? How is it that a woman can zealously advocate for laws that forcibly place a veil on / strip a veil off another woman's head, and not see that the 'oppressors' on the other side of the fence are people very much like her in

essence, doing exactly the same thing? Men one may suspect of deliberate detachment here, or even malice aforethought; but how does a woman manage to not see that this is before everything else about the right of every woman to make her own choices, and that refusing that right to one woman threatens its very existence for all?

But if I march forth bearing it as a banner, what exactly does it say? It has something to do with my culture and my country, though most of the people belonging to my homeland would be quite justly indignant if it were to be deemed representative of them. I sometimes call it 'the hood of my religion' – but my religion does not actually ask me to wear an āñchal. It only tells me to dress modestly, and a hoody or a bonnet are just as capable of covering my head as a scarf or a chador. So – for me at least, my wearing the dupatta on my head is above all my flag of the freedom to choose, to snap my fingers in the face of society and dress as I dashed well please.

Shells

Once upon a time there was a girl. She went one day to the sea, as she had gone since babyhood, wriggling her bare toes in the sand, revelling in the wind and spray that whirled her tangled curls into a frothing, frenzied cloak.

Then she saw the shells. She saw them as she had never before seen them, and of their sudden, overwhelming beauty mingling with the sea was born in her tremulous gaze a vision. She threw herself onto the sand, and began almost absently, shell by shell, to strive to give it form. And ever it eluded her; it slid chuckling from her fingers, yet it burned furiously in her eyes. Torment and ecstasy … hope and despair, longing and loathing… locked by the very irrevocability, the very starkness of their opposition, in unceasing battle, each following upon the other's hem, wisp-like, insidiously all the while, until it strangled the other.

Wretchedness such as she had never before known ripped at her, making each ragged breath a struggle against her heaving, aching chest. Her fingers faltered and her head drooped, her sobs stormy despite the resolutely bitten lips. Never, never could she make it; however she laboured she could never give substance the essence, the sweet richness of fleeting shadow.

The warmth of fingers on her shoulder made her start. Through a tearful mist she saw a smile emerging from a sheet of wrinkles spread taut over sunken bones, and wizened brown hands moving delicately among the shells.

She returned the smile with a small, lopsided one of her own, and began gingerly to finger one edge of a spiralling shell …

She was working feverishly, oblivious to the wonder in the old, wise eyes, the curiosity of children and the disdain of their elders. It was no longer her mind or heart that willed the form, but the murmur of the sea seeping into the trembling of her fingers. The shells were moulded to its least tug, the design altered to suit every pettish plaint, each discontented mutter.

At long last it was done. She felt no sense of fulfilment or happiness, but only a great weariness, and an ardent desire for sleep cheered with dreams of anything and everything but the sea … She slept, but it was tranquil, dreamless sleep, deep and refreshing.

And when she woke again, she looked stunned upon her handiwork, and then at her sandy fingers, scarcely daring to believe. But still the sea called to her, demanded something of her – she fidgeted and fretted, trying to shut it out, but it only grew more clamorous, more insistent…

"No!" She snarled through clenched teeth. She would not throw it to the ravenous waves. Sooner would she stamp it back into the earth – No! Not that either!

It was hers. She would keep it forever. It would be her treasure, her precious … never, ever could she fling it to the ruthless battering of the waves…it was hers, and hers alone. The sea had provided the inspiration, yes, but that did not mean it owned her masterpiece…

She would keep it, and show it only to those who loved her and whom she loved. She gathered the weed-rotted plank on which it rested, and began to run, away, away, away from the sea.

They all gathered around her, exclaiming, praising, making suggestions. Her parents, her brothers and sisters … those she loved and those who loved her. She

grinned proudly, her eyes shining, and bleak despair crept into her heart, choking her… The secret of the shells was nothing to them. They cared for the neatness of the design, the symmetry and variety of pattern, seeing in them the same cosy, reassuring prettiness as an ornamental vase or a chintz cushion. They did not hear the song of the sea in every curve, did not recognise the inexorable, unappeasable savagery in the soft, soothing ripples. The storms of wrath lurking within dulcet lullabies the menacing discord of long-decayed bones, the thirst and the wild hunger of the blue depths – they did not see these things. It was just a stack of shells to them, albeit a charmingly arranged one. And it would always be thus. The sun and sand would deafen them and deaden them to the call of the Sea, the imperious, alluring, fascinating cry that would brook no denial.

She was being ridiculous. With a toss of her curls she dismissed her errant thoughts. The thing was hers; she would take it back with her, and show it to all her friends as well, and everyone else. She spoke her intention aloud, and it was instantly acclaimed. The plank was declared too weak and exposed a base; instead a box was procured, and they all began to help her transfer it.

They laughed and talked as they worked. Many times she missed a subtle twist or nuance, and only corrected the error when the others reminded her of it. The waves wept chagrined reproaches in her ears, but she was dead to them. She would acknowledge no will then but her own.

But they too had wills, and voices, and fingers which moved rapidly, dislodging what they would and replacing it as they pleased. Mutilating it.

The grin became a scowl; the flush in her cheeks was now one of rage. She wanted to cry out her indignation, to guard it and cherish it as a lioness does her hapless cubs. She stood sulky and silent, battling her own headstrong self that bucked at the merest suspicion of another hand on the reins.

They made it stronger, better, added, undeniably, to the beauty and variety of its patterns. It was, under their thoughtful pruning, acquiring polish, sophistication, and – And she hated it. It was no longer the absurd, wilful outpouring of the fire running amok within her; instead of the rangy, dishevelled grace of the vagabond it had the smirking sleekness of a Siamese cat, cleaning its whiskers with insufferable complacence.

She turned and ran. The others were enjoying themselves so much they scarcely even stopped to shrug. She would come back in a while, as she always did. Only the old woman stared after her … In a way, she did understand. But what she understood she did not say. Not even to herself.

The girl threw herself into the sand, letting its hard grains grate against her scalding tears. She lay quite still. And the tears filled her eyes, one by one, and dripped onto her sand-coated cheekbones, streaking them with wavering rivulets. She tried to stay them, but they would not be denied. Neither would they expend themselves in a single stormy rush as they had always done before. One by one they rolled out, and with them, imperceptibly, all her fury. Numb, exhausted again as she had been when she had first fashioned it, she tried to summon sleep.

It would not come. Instead, thought stamped its way in, trampling over her lacerated, wincing mind, hectoring and

chivvying it, its many shrill tongues lashing out with a ruthlessness that would have deadened the steel of a gladiator.

'Call of the Sea' – hah! Stuff and nonsense, childish imaginings worthy of a toddler with her first 'Teddy' … What were the shells but a child's playthings? It was she and not they who had been doltish. They had indulged her fancy, consenting to join in her folly; for which, instead of being grateful, she wanted to throttle them!

She got up, wiping her face carefully to remove as much as she could of the tell-tale traces of tears, and went back. They had already finished with it and had drifted back to the sea, laughing and splashing and enjoying themselves tremendously.

"Come on!" They urged her. "Join in! It's so much fun!"

She grinned. "Sure!"

She got up, and in doing so knocked the box slightly askew. Idly almost her fingers strayed back, pushed aside the lid…

She shut it abruptly, clenching her quivering fists, her teeth digging so hard into her under lip they tormented its translucent pinkness deep crimson. Still the wave surged through her pulse; her sobbing breath rose and fell to the rhythm of the sea. She was losing herself again…she would not. She would dam it. Dam and damn and be rid of it forever. Dam the tempest within her heart, her soul… She clutched at the sand, the shells, the sea itself…

But it crushed all her barriers, crumpled and crushed and trampled them and bore her away on its cruel, buffeting waves. Yet it was not mere assault from without that had availed against the citadel; the traitor who had

thrown wide the doors of her fortress was within her – within her very marrow…

She flung her glorious mane loose of its messy bun, and bounded forward with an exultant cry, arms outstretched, eyes blazing in a blistering agony that was wreathed around frenzied joy. They laughed negligently, pityingly at her heartache over the pathetic little heap she had amassed. The sea could have it. The whole world could have it if it wanted it. Who cared?

The sea was within her, just as she was within it. It would call to her always whether she would or no…and each time it would sink its ravening tentacles deeper into her yielding flesh, siphon out her very life-blood and pour them into the shells to lend them lustre.

The others… she heard their jovial shouts, and felt a pang of envy. They did not understand because they could not. They could sing and dance and hoot in the very waves if they pleased. The call of the sea was hers and hers alone. Her joy and her torment. Exquisite madness; ecstatic misery… It was her destiny, her doom, her dungeon – her life itself.

"Come on!" They beckoned again. "Honestly, you'll love it! At least check it out!"

She nodded and smiled reassuringly at them. "In a minute. You guys go on, don't worry about me." And then she knelt upon the sand and began to pile shells anew.

Sıfır Genç Bir Sayı

I refuse myself the sweltering swig. All around me they gulp and squirm, while I snicker at the pigeons scampering in the road. When the red light turns green they shall flutter and fly, only to come flocking back behind us, just as we will shuffle hither again tomorrow and wriggle ourselves again into this lurching tin crate. The butterfly alone will not return, that soaring papillion, the farfalla that brushed the glass with its wings and twirled away, like the zero in a counting book squiggled into a corner of the page of one, with nothing to have or to hold, not even a long history. Arigato, mariposa mia, for drifting past us in grace. If you had drawn closer, lingered, I might have remembered the cocoon and the carrion. Daughter of the air, you bring water instead upon your wings, the first trickles from a melting skyscream. Turfed out of the tin turned refuge from the groaning ciel, I flee the flowing rain to stand under the spitting faucet and watch it drain, this relentless swirling torrent of water I command with a flick of the wrist. I refuse myself the sweltering swig.

So Here's To A Life Of Glory

Alya tossed the last copy onto the pile, checked and signed with a flourish. The whole zig-zaggy tower teetered and came crashing down, ignoring her panicked grabbing. “D-n,” said Alya, and started rounding up copies with her fingers and toes.

Umbreen passed her the two that had missed her tea-cup by the width of a ball-pen. “Your sister’s demo-lesson is today, right? What’s her name again?”

“Alina. You’ve met her. At my cousin Samira’s wedding? Remember?”

“That sister. The high-strung, poetry-scribbling child? And you decided this was the right place for her. With a degree in English, she’s going to have to teach, I get it, but – here?! Are you insane? Find her a posh little all-girls school, at least for the first year!”

By now everyone was listening. “I found her two,” said Alya. “I sent in her CV myself and dragged her to the interviews. One offered her the job; she said no. She wants to teach here, if you please.”

“Which class did the Head give her?”

“Oh, I picked it. 5B. She’s there now.”

An appalled silence descended upon the room. “5B? They’ll kill her. In the unsupervised twenty minutes, they will definitely kill her, even if the Head manages to control them for the rest of the period.”

‘That’s why I chose it.”

‘Yesterday,” said Saima, before Umbreen could answer. “One of them threw a compass at me. A COMPASS. Missed my eye by inches, I tell you. Inches. And on Friday –”

“One minute to the bell,” Umbreen cut in hastily. “We should go.”

Alya had re-stacked the copies in three demure piles by now, and criss-crossed those neatly on top of her folder. “Maybe I should drop by 5B on my way to 5G,” she said in a low voice to Umbreen.

“You think?”

The bell rang. Umbreen reached for the door-handle, but it was opened from the outside. “Alina! Are you okay?”

The girl in the doorway was panting slightly, and her hair was falling out of her half-unpinned bun. There was chalk on her sleeves and an ink-stain on the hem of her shirt. But she was grinning.

“Well?” said Alya “How did it go?”

“Oh, it was fine,” said Alina, sitting down on the butt-printed sofa with a thump. “I forgot to give the children the homework in the plan, but the Head says just this once it doesn’t matter.”

“Did they throw anything at you after the Head went out?” asked Umbreen

“Paper balls and erasers, but I caught them all so they stopped. They’re not that bad, you know,” she said to Alya. “You always make them sound like such demons. But there is one thing I don’t understand. Why do all the boys in 5B want to be psychotherapists?”

“What?”

“That's what they all said, every single one of them, when I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Was it like a career-day thing? I was thinking, maybe they met a counsellor or someone who really

inspired them, and … Wait. Why are you two looking at me like that?"

Umbreen glared at Alya, who was laughing uncontrollably. "You'll do, kiddo," she said to Alina. "You'll do. Welcome aboard."

Rackle

The head eats first, through the eyes, through the nose, even through the mouth, but no one blames the head. The head savours the food, the stomach only stores it, and that for a while. It does not even spill most of the fat-making molecules into the blood, but it's the stomach you all glare at, the stomach you mock and deride and lament. The stomach does the grunt work, the churning and grinding, and gets all the hatred: the head gets to guzzle its fill and shrug off the blame. But it's heads, not stomachs, that hold all the tongues. And you know what they say: until the lion learns to tell its story … Well, here is a stomach-lion, speaking with a stolen tongue. So listen. Why do you fly? Ah! All the ears belong to heads too.

Rose of All the World

At five and forty, running a chore for a manager he despised, he drove for the first time to the outskirts of the City. The shabby, chugging misery of a car he could ill-afford on his meagre salary belched its frustration at the neat boxes of shoulder-high grain. Inside, the man kept it company with a furrowed brow and a noxious cigar. The corn tossed its myriad heads in a disdainful refusal to take offence, which left the pair more disgruntled than ever.

City born and city bred, he had never seen Nature untrammelled. Prim, spiky shoots in flowerpots and green girdled round by smoky roads drew no more than a flickering glance. He deemed them no worthier of his attention than the gravel his boots scrunched.

On he went, truculent, nostalgic for the smells of ink and leather and burning petrol that he greeted each day with his choicest swearwords, mortally afraid of the dusk-shadows. Beside a vacant field he pulled over to tinker with his flagging car, hoping to coerce it onward, for it was running low on fuel and patience. Exhaustion turned it into fifteen minutes, then twenty … one and twenty, two and … defiantly humming the bawdiest songs he knew, fighting off slumber to the utmost, he fell asleep at the wheel.

He awoke with the sun rosy upon his face, and lumbered groggily to his feet. Through him was stealing an intense, poignant warmth he had not felt since the day he had forgotten how to cry. The shells and shields that encased his heart cracked, collapsed and were carried away by the current; like a lad smitten for the first time by the glistening eyes of a maiden fair, he crept from leaf to dewy leaf with hammering heart. His fingers trembled as

he reached out the blossom veiled within, and stroked the delicate petals.

"What's your name, Beauty of the Wilderness?" He whispered, and preening, ruffling in the wind, she answered him:

"Rosa mundi, Rose of all the world!"

The sun beamed upon him, and the wind withdrew, giggling and hooting. With it went his gaze to the stately trees in the distance that austerely creaked disapproval. He gazed upon them in awe and in some apprehension; then the besotted-swain grin returned as the cheep-cheep of fretful sparrow chicks cut into the trees' swishing.

Sighing, he walked with lagging steps to the car. This job done, he would be back in the confounded City, trapped there forevermore. Visions of giving up his career and setting up as a farmer or hermit vanished ere they came. Impossible … Yet how sweet it would be to linger, to dwell forevermore in the forbidding shade of the trees, with the chicks perched on his wrist, and Rosa furling and unfurling her veils, toying with the thrumming of his life-blood. Impossible. This fecundity that soothed and gladdened and exalted all at once was barred to him.

With impending loss came cruel, grasping desire. He swooped upon the delicate flower he had considered it almost a sacrilege to touch, and wrenched it off, caring nothing for the outraged thorns that broke into his skin with tremendous oaths, or even her heartrending wails.

He stuffed his prize into his pocket, maiming a sepal, and pounced upon the nest. M. le Sparrow saw him coming, and shrilled out a warning to Madame. "Guard the nestlings, Chérie!" He cried, and charged beak first at the invader. The man caught him as it struck his cheek,

drawing blood. Maddened by the pain, he broke M. Sparrow's head open with one hard blow of his fist. With a heartrending cry Madame leapt after him, but the same gigantic implement knocked her breathless to the ground. He lifted the nest tenderly, and carried it to his car with gentle words upon his lips. The nestlings wept long after he had stridden off to the grove again.

He threw his arms around Father Oak, and strained to rip him bodily from the earth. Father Oak watched the puny creature's antics with astonishment, and turned to Mother Maple as he dropped panting to the grass.

"What does the little rat think to do?" he demanded.

"What he and his kind have always done, and always shall do," she answered grimly. "Plunder, ravage and desecrate!" And she told him of Rosamund and the Sparrow children.

"Dastard!" Thundered Father Oak. "Would that I had him within branch-reach now!"

"What then, Querus? He would drag it off with his forepaws."

"A blight upon him and all his race!"

"Amen!" Said Mother Maple. "And may my samara and your acorns be protected –"

"Not so loud!" he growled, but it was already too late.

The misshapen monster was raking the grass. His scrabbling fingers fastened upon an acorn, then a wispy seed that had drifted next to it. He went home, ferociously joyful, ignoring the plaintive chirping of the little chicks, and the failing gasps of Rosamund.

He put her at the very top of the artificial daisies in his bedroom, put the nest by the window with a little grain in it for the babes, and planted the oak and maple in marble

pots he had purchased on the way home. They were now part of his life, he thought contentedly, and would always be there for him to love and cherish. Jauntily he went to work, making his assistant jump nearly out of his skin when he greeted the boy with a clap on back and an amiable 'How d'y' do?'

But when he came home again, he found the chicks cold with the untouched grain beneath them, and Rosie withering, crepe-black. Shouting execrations to mask his desolation, he struck them away from him. He tended his seeds obsessively. Slowly, very slowly, Little Oak and Baby Maple ventured to raise tender green shoots, and on them sprouted leaflets that were the pride of his life.

One night, as he dozed before the television, he heard a sob and the clucking sound made to comfort childish sorrow.

"Little Oak, Little Oak, don't cry so!" said a voice clear as a silver bell. "You'll wake him!"

"Let him be wretched eternally, the scoundrel! Remember what Rose told us? We are not meant to be here, in this windless room starved of sun and rain alike. Our place is in the Wild of which the Sparrows sang, to cleanse and enrich it and thrive upon it in turn! "

"And remember also what happened to Rose!" said Baby Maple tremulously.

"Sooner or later we must face the same end, Baby Maple."

"No!" shouted the man, leaping up in horror. "Baby Maple, Little Oak, I shall not permit you to wilt!"

Baby Maple shrank from him and folded her leaves close, but Little Oak drew himself up with the majesty of all his kind that had gone before. "Human," He said, in a

guttural voice that reminded the man most unpleasantly of Father Oak. “In this noisome den of yours none save your kind can exist. Do your worst; you cannot hold us here. Faugh!”

“If - If you truly mean those words,” whispered Baby Maple “Set us free!”

“Here you will stay!” raged the man, “Here you will stay. An you never grow as high and mighty as your parents, I care not; indeed, it is better so.”

Thenceforth they spoke no more to him. Day by day they faded in silence, and one morning Little Oak crumpled. The man raved, he swore, he behaved in a fashion that set his neighbours wondering whether to call the police or the asylum, but Baby Maple heeded him not. Before the day was out she too had fallen.

With her passing the man’s dream was finally broken. He threw their bodies away, as he had done before with the nestlings and the rose, forcing himself to stick rigidly to his routine. His hook-nosed face had become gaunt and sinister, and mothers dragged their children aside when he walked upon the crowded city pavements.

He set out for work in the morning, and found himself driving in an entirely different direction. Out of the City he slipped and up the long highway, too spent for concerted thought, until he came to the vacant field.

The roars of Father Oak greeted him, and the battering of metal on wood.

“Stop! Stop!” He screamed, running into them full-tilt, and seized their axes. “Kill him and he will wreck you! Peace will desert you; his dying groans will haunt you to the grave!”

"Eh? Dying groans – haunt – the poor fellow's mad!" said the woodcutter in consternation.

"Crazy or not, he has my axe, and I mean to get it back." Declared his companion. "Dolt, give that back here or I'll brain you with it before we start on the tree!"

"Easy, easy. Let me handle this." The first wood cutter stepped up to the man. "Sir, please return our tools. We must finish this tree before sun-down –"

"No. No. Allow me to explain," He saw that they were baffled by his behaviour and not a little angry, and strove for a semblance of logic. "Trees are of the utmost importance to us and our environment. They supply us with oxygen." He blinked. What else did trees do? Years ago, somewhere, they'd studied it in science class … he'd rote-learnt it for the exam and dismissed it with the rest of the bookish claptrap. "We need them. They supply us with medicine, wood –"

"Right you are!" said the first woodcutter, with false, baby-soothing heartiness. "Wood. That's what we want, see? But we need the big shiny axes for it. So hand them over, there's a good chap. You want trees? See the tall one over there with the pretty white flowers? Go on, take a look! There are dozens and dozens to look at around here."

"But," growled the second woodcutter. "Stay out of our way, okay? This tree here means my dinner, and I'll be hanged before I let a worm-witted nature-boy get in my way."

"You think I'm crazy. And a week ago I'd have said you were right." He began to laugh, a high-pitched giggle that accelerated into a maniacal cackle. The two woodcutters exchanged speaking looks. "Listen," he said, grabbing the

arm of the first wood cutter. "You can't chop these trees. They're my friends!"

This was entirely too much for the second woodcutter. He lunged for his axe and secured it with one tug of his work-hardened muscles. "We'll take this nutcase down to the station after lunch. Right now, let's get to work!"

"Oh no, please!"

"What's going on here?" demanded a stentorian voice from the road, and all three of them jumped. From a Cadillac descended a bloated, bewhiskered man with a permanent scowl for a face. "Lounging about again?"

"We were working, Boss!" exploded the second woodcutter. "Then this misery came along and started his damn' fool preaching!"

"He seems to be a little – uh, well, not right in the head," interposed the first woodcutter. "We were trying not to be too hard on him…"

The Boss pursed his lips, assessing the situation. Unbalanced, definitely. Or just a little bosky, maybe? These city people… because the man wasn't rich, or even comfortably well off, from the look of his coat and his car. Still, he might just be an eccentric, one of those tree-huggers who looked like suckers but turned out to be first cousins to a Judge or someone. And it was a virtuous deed to be kind to those mentally afflicted …

"Sir," said the Boss so politely the second woodcutter nearly dropped his axe on his foot. "What seems to be the matter?"

"They're chopping down the trees. I'm trying to explain that they must not. It sounds emotional, ridiculous… I know I'm not doing a very good job of it, but we do need the trees!"

"Of course, sir. I understand perfectly. Trees are essential to the survival of our planet and offer numerous benefits to us as well as our environment. They remove harmful gasses, reduce pollution, add good things, yes, yes, I fully appreciate all that. Look," He took two safety-pin badges out of his pocket. "I'm a member of both Greenpeace and WWF, and totally committed to saving the environment. I believe from the core of my heart that trees have immense value, in both material and sentimental terms."

"Then why are these men… they called you Boss…"

"Just in a manner of speaking. Right, lads? I would no more chop a tree than a child's head! Trees are our future, and our country already suffers from a dearth of forested land."

"Er yes." Said the first woodcutter hastily. The second woodcutter smashed his axe hard into the bole of the tree and said nothing.

"Don't worry, sir." The Boss had begun to shepherd the man imperceptibly to his car. "I was just coming around to have a word with them. Your tree friends won't be hurt any more. You there!" He yelled at the second woodcutter.

"Stop murdering the tree! And you, sir, can go home with an easy mind. Leave everything to me. A businessman like you must be far too busy…"

He saw the man into the car and off, smiling benignly until the car rounded the bend in the road.

"Does he mean all that stuff he said just now?" asked the first woodcutter.

"Does that mean we're fired? My daughter's getting married next month, I was going to ask for a raise… What

am I going to do now?" The second woodcutter smashed his axe hard into the bole of the tree and said nothing.

The Boss turned around. "Get to work, you filthy scum! Do I pay you to stand around doing nothing? Get that row of trees chopped by sundown, or I'll dock you for the day!"

Rouse The Living

'The dead stand behind me, roused from their undeadness' said the King to the City. 'Rouse the living. For Kingdom and Glory!'

'Let the dead do the gory work,' said the City. 'Afterwards we shall emerge with song and plough to sow the spring, and transform the red you run into the earth to a gladder colour.'

'That makes sense,' said the King. But the dead scowled.

'Well, now we are not doing it,' They said crossly, and went back to being undead.

And the City burned to ash.

Quail Before Me

"Quail before me! O mighty warriors, quail before me! Quail before –"

"There is no need to shout," said a gravelly voice from just above the bench. I turned around to find myself being looked up and down by a portly brown bird with a beetling yellow mono-brow. "Your mighty warriors appear to have deserted you, but you do have my attention. Proceed."

"I – The – Sorry, who are you?"

"The quail before you."

"No, I – that's not what I – what it means. I'm writing a play, you see, and the villain is trying to intimidate the heroes by telling them to – er – well – quail before him." I finished rather lamely.

The quail considered this. "I am afraid I do not perceive," it said at last. "Insofar as I am aware, quail is a noun in your tongue. The name you give to my kind."

"It is, it is, but it is also a verb. It means to be dreadfully frightened of someone or something. Oh, I'm sure whoever came up with it meant no harm," I added hastily. "It's just an expression. One of those things every language – oh my stars!"

A large dog bounding at one out of nowhere, even if it is of the friendly, tail-wagging type, will often give one something of a shock, and I had leapt aside in a sudden quivering panic before I could flounder all the way through my explanation. The quail, however, had remained upon its boîte-à-lire perch, and was surveying me with an amusement that made me grit my teeth.

"Human before me."

"Yes?"

“Just testing it out. O mighty pigeons, human before me! Hmm, yes, I think I can see the appeal.”

“Human before me.” A sparrow settled on an overhanging branch, chirping mockingly at the quail. “Are you so desperate for company you’ve taken to talking to the creature?”

“Of course not. I have simply been observing it, and I have invented a new word in consequence. To human. It means to shrink and tremble with dread.”

“Isn’t that a little bit specieist? Besides, it’s very clunky. To human. Hmm. I’m not sure …”

“Oh I think it will catch on,” cawed the crow, who had been eavesdropping. “Human, world! Human before me! Muhahahaha!”

I recoiled. “Hey! Stop! You can’t do that!”

“There!” said the quail. “You see that? It humans before us.”

“Hmm.” said the sparrow. “Upon reflection, I quite like it …”

Pronounce It Right!

I am a boiling pot of Englishes, bubbling frantically as they collide. When you massacre words in movies and other spoken things, I murmur them the right way until the foam of my wrath subsides. Inside, my fury festers ... But yes, of course yours is not the right way to pronounce these words! It's not waa'er, it's not whawta, it's just – water, what-er. Wand, not wond, for crying out loud, and naaasty sets the teeth on edge – can't you just say nasty? But it's paaass, not paess, and it's Paaakisstaan - must you Packiztann it?! What do you mean I don't get to tell you how to say it? It is my country's name. Pronounce it right! No, you shall not draw back now in bewilderment. You began this. You pounce on me at every turn with the indrawn hiss and the lifted eyebrow of supercilious pity. You won't even let me say o-one, the way my people have said it for a hundred years and more. No, it has to be av-un, 'because that's how we say it in English'. Very well, you may have oven; I concede it. But I must have Pakistan. And poem. I must have poem. Po-em it shall be, and not pomme. I will not say apples, voyons, when I mean dragons! Poems are splendor sleeping furled inside their forms like embryos in eggshells, and I need you to hatch them with me. Else you could have gone on calling them fruit with my goodwill … but what I have begun you must finish, or it perishes. So they must be po-ems and not pommes. Do you understand? No. Then listen. Listen to my wrymlings whispering in their dreams. 'Drop in the ocean, remember who you are. Drop in the ocean, remember …'

On A Throne Of Seashells

Bruja, bruja, bruja, she needs no costume. No black hat, no gown, no hooked nose. And her ride is balanced with star-fire, not with twigs. She stands, watching her bolder sister streak into the sky, holding the flame that will let her do the same. She watches the wild abandon that knows no return to earth with a fierce yearning strengthened by the memory of chocolate and giggled secrets.

Bruja, bruja, bruja, they chant, and she who used to slink woundedly away from their cruelty and hate sees only their awe now, and in that awe a goad that exhilarates where it cuts to the quick. But one regret washes over her darkling eyes, as she raises the flame in her palm to the sky. “All this time I was trying to begin my story right, when I should have been writing it!”

"So they did burn her!"

"They say she rose on a whirl of violet flame and streaked across the sky to become a star. And in the morning the leaves wept ash instead of dew."

"And then?"

"That's it. That's the end of the story."

Every single time, you shook your head. No. It's not.

Every single time, I sighed. "If there is more, we do not know it."

Each night, when I finished the story and left, you turned to the sky and whispered, bruja, bruja, bruja, like an enchantment or a prayer. Ten years later, you can speak it only in pain, in despair, in derision. But there was another story too, a story I told you only once. Child that you were, you laughed at the farmer’s daughter. Ten years

later, you begin to envy the tanner's wife, envy her the clichéd bliss of ignorance.

Once upon a time a farmer's daughter married a tanner. "The only thing that makes me unhappy,'' she said to her parents "is the smell of the hides. It infects everything – rugs, sheets, even clothes – and I cannot abide it." For weeks she soaped and scrubbed and beat every carpet in the house, in anticipation of her family's visit. When they came she met them with a smile of triumph "I have washed off the stench at last!" she announced, and as they choked on it they wondered how to tell her the devastating truth: she had not driven out the stink of the leather: she had become drenched in it.

It began slowly for you, not with zealous vows to murder tyrants and deliberate plunges into dens of vice but with preposterously petty compromises, with little lies white and black. It began with the fond belief that you could serve the petty without becoming one of them, merely by saying "I do this to survive, but this is not me, and it never will be." For each one who breaks a cycle ten more perpetrate it. But you know what is still more frightening? Nine if not all ten of those believe they have broken it too. Do you believe that too, my sister? Do you still watch broken stars streak across the sky and whisper bruja, bruja, bruja with your heart in your eyes?

Every day the milkman passes by our window, whipping his horse. The first time I saw him, I ran out to stop him, but you yanked me back so sharply the tears in my eyes turned from rage to pain. Then you let me go and sighed, the same tired sigh that was always the ending to your stories. The next time I saw him I did nothing. I learnt

to choke down the sickness in my throat and look anywhere but at that, the casually vicious creature wielding the whip and the misting eyes looking straight at me out of leather blinkers, too mild to be an accusation but not too blank to be a reproach. Here I stand now, watching him beat the new mare into submission. I watch her buck and scream in agony with the strangely detached interest of one who knows the conclusion is foregone.

They came to see me today, you know. Yes, they they. At first they fidgeted and hemmed and searched for euphemisms, but my glacial stare at the horse must have given them a paradoxical courage. So they told me, in those very words "We know your sister has given food and shelter to the enemy's soldiers –" Yes, I know it's true. I know too what you would not say if I asked you: they were wounded, dying, and they had nowhere else to go. Even after one of them ripped Mama's pearls from you, you did not close your doors to them. You picked up the one pearl that fell off where the string broke, kissed it and set it on a throne of seashells on the mantelpiece. I saw it and said nothing.

Oh sister, sister, all those lessons of survival you taught me so very, very well, between your stories and your arm-pinches and your sighs that hurt more than both, and did you learn none of them yourself? Here they stood, saying not in a whisper but in tones stentorian "It's too late for your sister, but you can still save yourself. Agree to denounce her and to testify against her …" They walked out not with broken heads but with smiles, reading assent into my ragelessness. Were they right? Is this open, spoken treachery to be the harvest of my lifelong betrayals-by-silence? I do not know, I do not know! But I know that you

will, when you see them coming, as they must inevitably come whatever I do or say. You will know the choice I made.

O bruja, bruja, bruja, would you not have done it too? Bruja, bruja, bruja, she needs no costume. No black hat, no gown, no hooked nose. And her ride is balanced with star-fire, not with twigs. She stands, watching her bolder sister streak into the sky …

One More Chapter

"Alack, I bring ill tidings!" The door creaked rather than burst open, but Fervé made up for it with a boot-thump. "Lycanthropes were sighted in the forest yestereve!"

Mayor Ahnon looked up from the planning permission he had just signed. "Lycan – what?"

"We must band together to hunt the vile creatures down!" Fervé turned to Cassé, who was still looking at his file. "Will you join us, Mr Cassé?"

Cassé yawned. "Maybe. But could you settle a bet for me first, please?" He gestured towards Fervé's tilted top-hat. "However do you keep it from falling off? My sister Brisée is convinced you pin it in place."

"I do not!" snapped Fervé.

"Oh, I'm on your side, I assure you," said Cassé soothingly.

"Well, you have your permit, Mr Cassé," said the Mayor, sliding the dictionary he had been squinting at inside his desk. "If you'll excuse me, I have a lyc – a werewolf hunt to plan."

"Wouldn't it be better to keep all the humans out of the forest?" asked Cassé. "Unless you think the werewolves are likely to enter the town?"

'Well, I – yes, I – no," said Mayor Ahnon. "One must do something, you know. Act decisively! Impresses the voters."

"Happy campaigning," said Cassé, and tipped his hat to the fuming Fervé as he sauntered out.

They went to the forest at midnight. Fervé saw a glimmer of a lantern just as Mayor Ahnon was about to

suggest giving up, and sure enough, at the end of the path a werewolf sat on a log reading a storybook.

"Aha! We've caught you at last, vermin!" cried Fervé.

The werewolf marked his page with a dry leaf and set the book aside. He bowed with an elaborate flourish. "Greetings, gentlemen!"

"I told you to put out that light, didn't I?" said a sleepy voice behind him. "But nooo, you had to finish the fricking chapter!"

Mayor Ahnon blinked. "Mr Cassé? Miss Brisée?"

"Treachery! Deceit!" screamed Fervé. "Behold the monsters in our midst! Avaunt, hideous miscreatures!"

"Hideous? You wound me, sir," said Cassé, "but you, I must concede, do look positively delectable tonight."

"Cannibal!"

"Only if you insist on coming closer."

"I wouldn't touch him if I was starving!" said Brisée.

"Child-eaters!"

"Now to that I really must object!" said Cassé, with some heat.

"Mayor," said Brisée. "I've taught the first grade for ten years. I'm your granddaughter's class-teacher. Do you really think I would ever hurt any of the children?"

"Well, I – this is deucedly awkward," said Mayor Ahnon. "But I'm afraid –"

"Slay the monsters!" shouted Fervé, and the men behind him took up the cry.

"Well, I – yes, well," said Mayor Ahnon. "Slay the monsters. Quite."

"Monsters, eh?' said Brisée. "Well, perhaps we are."

“So who do we blame this time?” asked Cassé, watching the fur recede from his blood-stained fingers.

Brisée was looking at the rising sun, its pristine gold set against soft blue with just a trace of red hemming the edges. “The moon?”

On The Other Side Of The Fence

The ridge curves sharply, imperiously into a beak, belying the simmering tranquility of the two pale lakes on either side of it, of the smooth snowy plains below, matching only the starkly jutting plateau of chin that completes my impression of a nature eternally at war with itself. Short, scuttling, plump, with long brown hair too resolutely straight to be natural and a scent of vigorously-soaped cleanness scattered all around her, she walks past me every morning, sparing me two jerky backward glimpses out of the avid curiosity of emerging adulthood that hungrily bores into everything in its path.

I wonder what goes on under that primly-pleated hair… Threading the sewing-machine again, Maria stitched the dreams of her lost childhood and the youth she had never had into the fabric of the schoolgirl's life. And she, chewing her lower lip as she dragged her feet along, was consumed by a fierce unsuspected envy of this old aunty who could sit out here in the gentle winter sunshine instead of having to face a demon of a teacher with her homework half incomplete.

Nestling

She scanned the ground, shaking her head to unblur her eyes. Slitheries or crunchems? He would eat the slitheries if she took him those, but she knew it was the crunchems he loved. So it was the crunchems she hopped towards, even though he was so difficult to fill up on them. It was the first time they had hatched only one egg, and the gawky creature who had emerged was utterly unlike any of their older slender-winged families. They had mourned the inexplicable smashing of the other eggs, but once he hatched they were too busy to remember them very often, except for the occasional pang when they saw other new parents with a full nest.

But they were so very proud of him too, their big strong boy with a voice like a trumpet, not the feeble cheeping of the Daffensy children or the thin treble of the Glendows. One day soon he would learn to fly, then come back to build his own nest with his mate as other once-nestlings had done. She dipped down and picked up a crunchem almost too large for her beak, and remembered with an angry frown Mrs Daffensy's words "You'll break your wings and your heart over him, and then he'll fly away. And one day his egg will be the only one left in a nest for another pair of simpletons to slave over."

She had shoved the unmistakeable meaning of those words sternly aside, but they would never quite leave her. As she bent tenderly to place the morsel in the his beak and saw the hunger in his eyes turn to a moment's contentment, her mother-heart fluttered and filled with joy, and she knew he was worth every sacrifice, every misgiving, every heart-break.

Maryam

When Maryam's father brought home the mangoes that Sunday, her brother Zain leapt for the gold-and-silver ribbons in the shopping bag, and threw them at her as he always did.

"Maryam ki Shadi!" He yelled, capering about her, on his toes to dodge the book or shoe or whatever missile came to her hand. She would chase him round and round the house, both of them laughing, until Mama put a stop to their nonsense. They would flee giggling up the stairs with the mangoes they'd filched in the commotion, and gobble them all up.

Maryam got up slowly, dusted her head and went back inside without even looking at him. He blinked in astonishment at the gold-and-silver ribbons spread-eagled on the grass, then jumped as Papa called him to lend a hand with the fruit.

Maryam was twenty-three. She was in the last semester of her M.A., a tall willowy girl with eyes that scintillated in the candles they lit for dinner when the light went. She was chock-full of fun and gig, ripe for every rag and dare. She was a girl, of course, and quite as squealy as the rest of them when it came to moths and lizards; but he secretly preferred her to all the brothers he might have had.

He dumped the mangoes and grapes in front of Mama, who was darning Papa's blue shirt. "Papa's home," he said.

"Is he? Did he bring the lentils I asked for?"

"I don't know. Mama, is Maryam ill?"

"Maryam? No, why, what happened to her?"

"Oh nothing much." He strolled out, chewing his lip, and aimed a kick at the door in passing, which earned him a sharp reprimand.

She'd been acting funny for weeks. For one thing she wouldn't play football anymore, and when he knocked her lame-duck excuses to flinders she hurled him bodily out of her room. Plus, she'd to mooning about in window-seats, and once he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. But Maryam didn't cry like that, not ever! When Maryam cried the whole neighbourhood heard it and shuddered.

Mama and Papa were getting just as bad, whispering together in corners, grouchier than the school principal if you so much as entered the room. Everyone had gone nuts. He shrugged and tossed up his bat, catching it deftly before it demolished Mama's precious swan-vase. If the stupid girl didn't want to play, it was perfectly fine by him.

At lunch the table was shrouded again in a silence mumbled commonplaces could not puncture. He rapped his plate impatiently with his fork, cleared his throat pointedly, and made sundry other attempts to bring the three mechanically chomping robots who were supposed to be his family to life. In desperation he took to slurping, but subsided when his father's head jerked back irately.

Even cricket was spoilt, he fumbled three catches because he couldn't concentrate, and the rest of his class team swore and appeared ready to pitch into him instead – but they did win, so it came off without a fight.

In the incurably insouciant fashion of boys he'd forgotten it completely by nightfall, however, and lounged in whistling to breakfast next morning. Maryam stuck out her tongue almost in her old manner, and he scowled back with delight.

"You'll be late for school at this rate, loser" she said.

"So will you, your hair's still dripping wet!"

"Maryam's not going today." Said Mama.

"Why? You said she's not sick."

"I'm not going because I'm not going. End of story."

"Mama, that's not fair!" He bit into his egg and bread. "Why does she get the day off and I never do?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Zain."

"But why?" he persisted, swallowing hurriedly.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough" said Maryam, with a pretty decent assumption of indifference, but he could see the red creeping up her cheekbones.

He went to school, and forgot his grievances as he played volleyball and wrestled equations. When he got back home Mama was waiting for him. She gave him a brand-new steam-pressed black suit.

"Bathe and put it on. And mind you don't spoil it."

"We're going out?"

"No, we have guests."

"Who?"

"You don't know them. They're Papa's friends, so make sure you behave yourself."

When he went downstairs Mama was washing the porcelain tea set, alone.

"Where's Maryam?" He asked, shaking water out of his ears. "Why isn't she helping you?"

"She's getting dressed. You come here and help me!"

Willy-nilly, he did.

The guests came a little after twilight. They certainly weren't like any friends of Papa he'd seen before. There was a thin balding man and a fleshy wife who kissed Mama as though she meant to suck off the cheek. Behind them came two dumpy girls who seemed not to know how exactly to smile. And finally there was a youngish sort of fellow with square hands that kept returning to his pockets.

Papa was talking to the two men earnestly about everything and nothing, Mama was chatting in the hateful squeaky girly way to the balloon-faced aunty. The dumpy girls were trying to look at him without looking at him and he was trying to look at them without looking at them. Of Maryam there was absolutely no sign.

About half an hour passed like this, and he sat stock-still, like the guard Max and Juan had taken for a statue in Guilty or not Guilty, imagining what the dumpy girls would say if he told them they were as ugly as his class-teacher.

Mama went out with a swishing creak. The door opened again, and Zain looked up expectantly; she was probably bringing in the snacks.

It wasn't Mama. It was – Maryam.

And it wasn't Maryam at all. She was wearing a full-skirted sky-blue sari of georgette – but Maryam hated georgette! – And – and lipstick, for crying out loud, and powder, and eyeliner. Maryam!

He wanted to shout, to shake some sense into her head, but he was transfixed. Now the dumpy girls were waddling forward, the balloon-faced woman was cooing over her, and Maryam didn't even grimace at him over the wobbly horn clip. She kept her eyes on her mehndi-stained feet. And why the deuce was the blasted girl blushing?

For about half a minute after she had presented the sandwich tray to everyone in turn, she stayed, perched on the edge of the only straight-backed chair, looking up in timid, fleeting glances.

"Maryam, one of your friends is on the phone." Mama announced as she wheeled in the tea-trolley, and Maryam

glided from the drawing room. Mama was lying and Maryam knew it but she went anyway.

From the doorway she did shoot him one quick grin, and within a few days things slid back to normal, more or less. Maryam played football as enthusiastically as ever, and Mama shouted at the two of them for a good quarter of an hour when she shot it through the window of the dining-room. But she hadn't given over her crack-pot daydreaming and star-gazing in broad daylight. He didn't understand, but eventually he learnt to accept it with a shrug. Girls were crazy in ways no sane man ever did understand. As long as she was playing football, though, she must be all right.

His mid-term exams were approaching, and everyone conspired to make his life miserable. In frustration he gave up trying to watch TV in his fifteen minute breaks, because Mama kept grilling him on Math and Papa on Bio, and Maryam had developed an obsession with History. Of course Maryam had exams too, but no one ever policed her; it was taken for granted that she would top her class, or very nearly.

On the last day of his exams he came home with a savage resolve to play football and watch Naruto and behead anyone who dared to oppose this laudable project. He kicked open the lounge door with a whoop, for this one day he knew he privileged, that even Mama would say nothing. He had not, however, expected her to beam at him, or Papa to laugh his booming laugh and say "Rascal!' so indulgently. As for Maryam, she snuck her tongue into her cheek, and thumbed her nose, standing behind Mama so that only he could see her.

"Ooh! Gulab Jaman!" There was a full dish of them on the table, and he quickly grabbed two handfuls.

"Easy, kiddo, they're not running away," said Maryam, flicking him on the ear.

"What's the idea? End of Exams party?"

Mama and Papa exchanged glances. "Not quite," said Mama. Maryam was twitching her dupatta and wouldn't look at him.

"Your sister is engaged to be married."

"Wha – "He nearly choked. "The deuce? She's engaged to – who's she engaged to, precisely? Maryam doesn't know any boys!"

"The son of a friend of your father."

"Maryam doesn't know any boys!" chortled Papa. "Your son's growing into a fine scamp."

"You've met him, Zain. Remember, they visited us once, about two weeks before your exams."

"Who? Oyé!" he jumped. "Not the drippy article with the balloon-faced mum and the dumpy sisters? So that's why you were all acting weird!"

"Zain! Don't be rude about your elders!"

"If you marry him, Maryam, you'll have that loony as your mother-in-law. Ugh!"

"Zain, that's enough!"

"And you'll have to let her kiss you, and you'll have to do everything she says, and they'll all laugh at you because you can't cook –"

"ZAIN!!"

To his utter shock it was Maryam who defended him. "Chill, Mama, he's just teasing. Come on, kid, want a game?" He caught the ball reflexively, and they raced each other to the garden.

Tired and muddy, they trooped inside well after sunset. Suddenly, at the door of her bedroom, Maryam called him back.

"Hey, Zain?"

"Yeah?"

"That balloon face of yours – how horrible a mother-in-law do you think she'll make?"

"Hell's afire, what kind of damn' fool question is that? Stuff it, I'm off to watch Naruto!"

"Come on, what do you think?"

"How under the canopy am I supposed to know? She's a kissy, cooey, fussy old cretin, and she makes me want to kick something. 'Sides that, I don't know anything about her, okay?"

"But most people make you want to kick things, so that's not saying very much, is it?"

"Yeah, well, I haven't 'very much' to say! Get lost!"

"Right," grinned Maryam. "You don't have very much to say? That'll be the day … You'd better get to bed, you loser, I can hear Mama on the stairs."

"Go to bed? Not on your life! I have a full month of manga to read and episodes to watch and you want me to go to bed?"

"Naruto? What do you like about that silly cartoon?"

"Si-si-"He gagged and spluttered. "You c-ca-ll Naruto - silly?! And. It. Is. Not. A. Cartoon."

"Cut it out," said Maryam, unimpressed. "Seriously, now."

"Well, for one thing, there aren't any mothers-in-law in it, or annoying elder sisters!"

"Zain, Maryam, time for bed!"

"Ah no!" he moaned, and he sulked all the way as Maryam shooed him across the corridor to his own room.

He was late for breakfast, because the football had totally exhausted him. Mama had to go upstairs to haul him out of bed. It was porridge Maryam was cooking, and the smell drifted right up the stairs. He squirmed. He didn't like porridge but with Papa there he knew he would have to eat it.

"Have you added the sugar?" Mama asked Maryam.

"Yes, but I'm not sure … I'll taste it and see …"

"Bring it to me."

Mama nicked the steaming porridge off the ladle with a practiced dexterity that never failed to amaze them. She brushed her forefinger against her tongue, and went ominously still.

"Maryam, you foolish girl, you've put in salt instead of sugar!"

Maryam blanched. "Oh gosh!"

"'Oh gosh'? What's that supposed to mean, 'Oh gosh'? What are we going to eat for breakfast now? How many times have I told you to concentrate on what you're doing?"

"It was an accident, Mama."

The protest lacked the spirit he had anticipated. Maryam was rocking on the balls of her feet, clutching her book. Her eyes were not wide the way eyes were supposed to be when you were afraid. They were slitted and unfathomably stripped of their sparkle. Papa rustled his newspaper uneasily.

"Oh, let it go … it's only a bit of porridge! Zain, go and see if there's any jam in the fridge. We'll have that for breakfast instead, with toast. There should be enough

bread in the house. And if there isn't any jam we can always fry some eggs."

"You spoil her entirely too much!" grumbled Mama. "It's high time she stopped all this silly reading and learnt to pay attention to her work!"

"My work? This useless reading – I was paying attention, Mama. I wasn't reading when I put in the sugar. I'm sorry, Mama, but please don't blame the book for it!"

"It's not the book I'm blaming, it's you. Do you have to read all the time? You are not a child anymore, Maryam, you're a woman now, and you need to get over this childish habit of yours. Give me that book and go get the jam!"

"No." Now she was staring at Mama as though she had never seen her before. "I must read. I will read. Now and always!"

What the f- did Maryam think she was doing? Mama groused about her reading once a week but she always quoted nonsense and laughed. Assuredly she wasn't crazy enough to retort like that! And she was whiter now than the swan shaped salt-and-pepper holder, shaking like a blancmange – whatever that was supposed to be. Papa's hand was frozen half-way to his glasses and Mama was swelling very literally like the proverbial toad.

"Maryam, run!" He gasped as Mama lunged, impelled by some strange, ineluctable impulse, his voice withered to a hoarse caw. "Run!"

Maryam stood her ground, trembling but looking Mama right in the face, braced, waiting. Mama snatched the book from her – disjointedly, he noted that the title picture was a little girl with scintillating eyes who was holding a candle – and hurled it across the room.

For seven-and-thirty ticks of the clock no one moved, except that the chests of both women heaved, up and down, faster than the time. His shin was itching and he wanted to scratch it but the command to his hand was paralysed in a limbo on the other side of his brain.

"You are my mother." Maryam enunciated each syllable slowly, distinctly, painfully, and there were furrows in her face, around the eyes still inscrutable, still dead-dark. "You've loved me all my life. And you … What in God's name will it be like with a total stranger?"

Their world hinged on the answer – Mama's answer, Papa's answer, Maryam's – and, though it would take him a lifetime to realise it – on his answer too. Mama said nothing at all, just turned off the fire and hauled off the pot of ruined porridge to smoulder in the sink. Papa put his glasses back on, and Maryam took a pot of strawberry jam from the fridge and set it quietly on the table before him. The dead-dark furrowing that had first shocked them into silence was eating into her face now, settling into its lines as she toasted the bread, so that in another hour they would all have forgotten how to tell it apart from her smile.

Only the book flopped open on the floor spoke, fluttering its pages plaintively in the exhaust-fan wind, but Maryam never once turned to listen.

My Smartphone Is A Radical Polysemist

It creates semantic gaps where none exist in my Languemix. When I type Sun it gives me a many-cornered slice suffused with soft orange, peeping out from behind a spaceship-cloud clump. In this demure rainwater shroud I watch with baffled unrecognition the skin-searing scourge of our plains summers suddenly become sweet and saintlike. And yet, for Soleil, a mellower sound bound to greyer ink-skies, it gives me a glowing gold circle with eight orange triangles around it, a being wick and vital like a picture from a Fun with Shapes book. Which one of them would be Sooraj, if it were an Urdu-phone too? Or perhaps that would be a different kind of light-heat bringer altogether.

It creates new meanings which strain life into my words. Thus Moon and Lune are both little yellow crescents snuck into the right-most edges of grey circles, instead of hovering luminous balloons full of fluttery-sleeved people, wonderland-cat grins or buttered crescents with sleepy smiles. Fish and Poisson are improbably bright red, blue, green limp oval sacks with warging eyes, all stuck in a column upon a stick, not gracefully slithering matte creatures with water glistening on tails lovely even in death. Chánd and Machli quietly absorb these new signifiés too, uninvited and unheeded.

It creates new meshes which drain life out of my words. House and Maison are identical third-little-pig cottages with long red chimneys, and my clumsily-balconied flat-roofed Ghar is knocked right out of the picture, Here Butterfly and Papillon are both the same bronze-winged creatures nowise kin to the rainbow Titlees we made by painting one half of the page and pressing it onto the other

until the echo of its colours blossomed into the second wing.

As I blink at the unexpected nuages around the Sun, I wonder: does it also know the difference between Cheese and Paneer and Fromage then, the one I have never yet managed to explain to anyone? Or will it simply make up its own fresh valeurs for each and drown my fledgling polysemies in them?

Lasto beth lammen, O Ethuil ...

Enno onna enno enne.

I like watching your children die, O Spring.

When the leaves fell in the Autumn, gilded by age, I smiled to see them carpet the earth, remembering the glorious miracle of their birth, and thinking upon the rich green Summer of their youth. I welcomed the Winter of bare branches and snow that would teach my world to yearn for you to come among us again.

But this year, Winter came twice. And it has not yet stopped coming.

When the little leaves began to sprout, and the delicate little buds to peep out, Winter, greedy Winter, could not bear the thought of yielding its grip. So it sent down fresh flurries to smother your children in their sleep under its fiercely beautiful coconut-slices of snow.

I like watching your children die, O Spring.

I saw your friend the Wind take up arms against it then, shaking the branches free. Then you sent us once more the glorious dream of a Summer of strength and an Autumn of grace before we yielded to the inevitable Winter.

But winter is not done yet. Winter is here.

It is crushing your children to death again, swathing the world in white and strangling out every other colour from it. Winter is come for your blossoms, O Spring, and they must die before their time. Not for them the promised Summer of love and life and laughter, not for them the slow mellowing of Autumn, and the poignant beauty of bidding farewell to life. They shall be smothered in their cradles in the arms of their mother trees.

I like watching your children die, O Spring.

O Spring, will you still dare to come to us again, to trust your children to us? Know that we will do nothing for them. We will wind the wool tighter around our heads and let the white swathes smother them, over and over and over again.

Look

Look. 'Look' said each wondrous comical hodgepodge of illustrations. Just one word, the perfect invitation to draw in a child. I spent hours staring at each page, whispering the word like an incantation as I mined it for stories, or put in the ones I'd read and heard, from Goldilocks and Red Riding Hood to The Three Little Pigs and Puss In Boots. Soon I no longer needed the pictures to look, though my favourite books were generally those with illustrations, beautifully painted ones like the version of Black Beauty my mother found in the library, or the abridged version of Wuthering Heights in which each page of text was faced by a black-and-white illustration that I coloured in myself.

As I grew older, I began to read everything I could find, encouraged by my parents, who took me to two excellent libraries and bought me all the books I wanted. There were Blyton and Dahl books galore, the Hardy Boys, Harry Potter, Narnia, Tolkien, Alcott and Burnett; Agatha Christie, Daphne du Maurier, Georgette Heyer, Dickens, Thackeray, Twain, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, Hawthorne, the Brontes, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Scott ... and so on and on: everyone and everything, abridged at first and then unabridged. Later still came living authors - Kamila Shamsie, Khaled Hosseini, Mohsin Hamid ... another inexhaustible list. I did read poetry too: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Burns, Browning, Emily Dickinson ... but especially Enjoying More Poetry and the Teachers' Collections of Verse, at least half of which I copied out by hand.

Everything I wrote myself I hid or promptly threw away, whether revenge fantasies or what I later found out

is called fan-fiction. I had no notion of becoming a writer, however, until I was nearly eighteen years old. At that point I quite suddenly realised I was one, whether I would or no. I began to write in dreadful earnest, slaving over each line and crumpling up paper after paper. Writing, at this stage, was either pure exaltation or unmitigated despair, depending on whether I loved or hated what I had written. Now I am learning at last to laugh at myself a little, to concede that nothing will ever be quite as awesome or quite as awful as I think it, and to write on regardless of imperfection.

Poetry came later, and if I had realised it was doing so I would have fought it: I had accounted myself a writer of stories for nearly half a decade by then and never written a poem in my life. It would probably have won notwithstanding, for poetry has a most exasperating habit of sweeping aside all ditherings and what-ifs and existential crises. Stories often need coaxing and persistence, what Jack London called going after inspiration with a club. Poems tend to find you, club in hand, and clobber you until they are written. Some poems are nice enough to write themselves down quickly and almost independently of your brain, while others dance just out of reach for weeks on end, driving you to distraction. There is absolutely no way of knowing when the next poem will be written, what it will be about, or what form it will take. One thing however all poems do have in common: they all say 'Look'. Look at this image, this thought, this feeling poured into words, and bring your own withal. Look.

Kidding

If this is an equation, I am the X: you are the Y. In all the simultaneous solvings, it is the Y that dies so that we may learn the true worth of the X. Then, then, only then, do we learn the value of the Y. But here the chuckles of 'kidding, kidding!; hound X out instead, with half-apologies as sponges for its little missing things, voids, saignant by virtue of their absences. And if the sponge becomes too bloated to mop up everything, if it begins to ooze, the floor answers its dripping with 'you can't take a joke, you're whining', and other echoes of uttered words clattering like knives. So I rest my eyes on the green of the grass and the green of the dollar, on the colour that asks for nothing, and for everything. I force 'I am drying some seaweed for lunch, but I will go on plasticking the ocean' into the ABCD tune, and remember how shipwrecked children draw shipless seas until they can draw no more, until they become the waters, carrying the weight of the world's drowned on their lurching shoulders. Je suis personne et une personne. I write their lament in math-words, and cut open the absurd. I am the variable always solved for first, except here, except now, except in this grotesque pair of equations. If I am indeed the clown, you must laugh at, not with me. Remember?

Knives And Forks

This is the 'after' song. This is the song of a sock looking for its missing other, in a world where socks again hold meaning. This is the song of watching aeroplanes by day and by night with a childhood-like exultation born of their long absence, and of slowly learning to take them for granted again. This is the song of family tiffs that just end or drift away upon the scent of pizza, that do not become deadlocked into week-long trench warfare. This is the song of not googling for hours if it's forks and knives or knives and forks, of not trying to discover if spoons pair off with plates or bowls. This is the song of not wondering if the seagulls are still complaining about the pigeons by the river, or if without our bread they've become friends. This is the song of grumbling and scurryfunging with secret joy as the Sackville-Bagginses pull into the driveway, of watching a Bilbo and a Lobelia tilt at each other with unholy amusement ill-concealed. This is the song of no longer caring that the strange cakes quiz called you a dry cake stuffed with almonds on all three attempts while your facebook friends got to be black forests. This is the song of sitting together on long lazy evenings to speculate, à propos of nothing, if the mummy they pretended to wake would have said some ancient words of wisdom if it really did start talking, or if he would have sworn at the insect that killed him and asked for the latest court gossip. This is the 'after' song, for a world where chocolate patisseries topped with whipped cream are not our only cures for loneliness of the soul.

Jaunting Jauntily Away

My word is true, my resolve solid as the glaciers of my homeland, cry our noble heroes, but destiny laughs. Ice melts, it replies, and watches them break into shards skidding on scree. They die in the glory and the lightening of tragedy, against foes who bleed and die beside them, not of ten minutes spent laughing with a friend, of a careless hand-shake, of ordering a pizza… Yet in every war and in every plague upon the land the good and kind and ordinary must have died thus of banal and inglorious things, extras on the stage of History, kneaded by time into the numbers that our eyes glaze over. When this age is written about, shall we be chapter headings, section headings, sub-headings, three mentions squirrelled away in the index, or lost to the foot and end notes? Shall we perforce be either the nithings or the nothings, or are there other left things to be and to become? Exiled to a city threaded by a river, I dream of my own, whose river turned away from its fortress to carve itself a fresh road through sunlit fields. We retorted by drying the river out and driving trucks on the bared beds, jaunting jauntily away with no regard for the river's sputtering ire. Now it is we who must learn to tame the tide, to flatten the wave, to crouch under the grinding wheels driven over us and endure, until its fury is spent, until like the waters of the river we learn to spring once more to life and carry all before us.

Jotted Down What I Heard Me Saying, And …

"This metaphor in the third poem is amazing, and the last line – gut-punch! Should we shortlist it?"

"This is an experimental poetry magazine and that frigging rhymes. No."

"So we …"

"So we send a rejection."

Dear ~~Numpty~~ L----,

Thank you for your submission. While we appreciate the chance to read your work, we regret that we are unable to accept it for publication. ~~You're really good, but did you have to rhyme, like, every second line? It does say 'experimental' and 'avant-garde' in the guidelines, you know.~~

We wish you the best of luck finding homes for these poems!

Sincerely

Y-- S---

~~===~~

"Onto the next one… Okay, this is pretty experimental. Good too."

"Yes … But the writer lives in X--. This is a print magazine with no budget and that's half-way around the world."

"So … Okay, yeah, got it."

Dear ~~Writer who lives in a country whose name I can't pronounce~~ I----,

Thank you for your submission. While we appreciate the chance to read your work, we regret that we are unable to accept it for publication. ~~Hard luck, old bean, because your work is to me what Baby Bear's porridge was to~~

~~Goldilocks, but you live way too far and intl postage prices are just ridic these days.~~

We wish you the best of luck finding homes for these poems!

Sincerely

Y-- S---

~~===~~

"Well that's done. What's left on the TBR pile?"

"Let's see … this one's lame, this one forgot to attach the file … and this one, well. This one really needs to get professional help …"

"Nothing then. What are we going to do?"

"Extend the deadline by a week and tweet, post, insta our call for subs every day."

"Right. Do you want me to order pizza for lunch?"

"No way. We've already had pizza twice this week."

Dear ~~crunchy cheese and meat delight~~ P----,

Thank you for your existence. While we appreciate the chance to eat you up, we regret that we are unable to accept you for lunch. ~~Even though I really, really want to, twice a week is probably quite enough and my waistline is telling me to grab a salad instead~~.

We wish you the best of luck finding tums for those slices!

Sincerely

Y-- S---

Jumping On The Bed

When at last they all marched out, to the fifes and drums that play over the hills and far away, all of us sought to cleanse and mend our desecrated lands. Some sought oblivion, catharsis, rebirth in new names: Ceylon became Sri Lanka, Burma Myanmar, and Siam Thailand.

Did they heal themselves thereby? We do not know.

[Tell us. Please, tell us, we need to know this.]

Others, like Singapore, Japan, and China, kept the name and forged themselves new selves instead, for better or for worse. Or maybe they excavated and glued into wholenesses / new brokennesses their old souls buried deep in colonial vaults.

Did they heal themselves thereby? We do not know.

[Tell us. Please, tell us, we need to know this.]

And we who hail from the Land of the Lost? Hacked out like a first-time-baker's sponge-cake slices from a baking pan, born in blood and brotherhood as two unwieldy wings minus a bird, what were / are we? One little country jumping on a bed, half fell off and found a new dread – of its own erstwhile self; and so forged itself a new name from the carnage.

Did it heal itself thereby? We do not know.

[Tell us. Please, tell us, we need to know this.]

And then there is the riven country left panting on the crumpled mattress staring dizzily at the square edges of the ceiling, wondering as it clutches its aching back and gropes for the light switch, with History, ours and others', buzzing questions into its head: Who am I Why was I born? What am I meant to be, do with the life I was given? What When Where Why How shall I mend when I don't know what I look like unbroken?

Can it / we heal itself / oursel(f/ves) thereby? We do not know.

[Tell us. Please, tell us, we need to know this.]

Imposture

The table's chipped and cripped ridges bite into the flesh of my fingertips as I drum on the cloth patterned with Spring slowly uncasing flowers to reveal solace as a thing lent, not given, and that only when it is yearned for and earned with shivering sacrifice and the barrenness that follows slaughter. Rooted in a respectability blanketed and blinkered by fat cheques and all the things I would never dream of doing, I wrench grandeur out of commonplace things and painstakingly hammer them into ponderous poesies. But they fall lifelessly from my fingers, defeated by the poem-seeds that conspire to reveal what I would fain hide: mine is no tale of grandeur and darkness, of blighting woe that finds no respite save in song. And if I am to call myself poet it must be so, must it not?

Crushed beneath my innumerable self-inflicted shoulds, these things nonetheless insist on being written, these things that unmask my shamefaced truths: my joy in the gently overcast skies of a francilien winter and in boites à lire, my unconquerable and vicious envy for everyone on the train home who has a seat when I do not have one, my love-hate relationship with my chosen Half Plate of linguistics and research. I am happy and healthy and grateful for it withal, so that with the best will in the world I could not wish it were otherwise. And yet, is happiness not ineluctably shallow and only pain the fount of true poetry?

Imprisoned Lightning

Once upon a time, there was a nation that dreamt of a land of the pure, with unity, faith and discipline as its watchwords. It turned into a land of the lost instead. But the dream - the dream lives on: as long as one soul remains to bear its lantern into the future, the dream will never die. Like its sister-dream of liberté, égalité, fraternité, which Eden itself would be hard put to realise, it may never find us worthy. But we dream of what we yearn to be, not of what we are, and that desire is what keeps us human in spite of ourselves.

All that is noble and blest is made up of such dreams, and among the most splendid dreams in history there was also this one :

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Never mind who first pinned this dream to paper, never mind if the nation that embraced these words for all the world to see ever truly 'meant' or 'deserved' it. Is there, has there ever been, a nation upon this earth that could look its past - or its present - in the face?

Dreams do not ask of us their guardians pure hearts and untainted souls. They only ask that when we look upon the bleak truth of our world and find ourselves forced to say, "Not yet" we smile and hoist their banners a little higher, whispering "Tomorrow is another day." So that the people of the world may smile also, and take up the echo of our whisper, to carry the dream beyond the

sunset upon the wings of hope. Because when there is no one left to whisper the dream onward it must die.

And today I wonder - this song of the Mother of Exiles, must it now perish? Or are there still guardians left to stretch forth her beacon-hand? Will there be someone somewhere, today and tomorrow and a thousand years hence, who will catch up the banner of this most glorious and wistful of dreams?

I Write; Therefore ...

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.' She yanks down the lid of her laptop, holding on to the thread of her verse, blocking out the voice with her gritted teeth. But it takes the poem with it when it finally goes away. …

A shadow over her shoulder. '"Shizenade knelt down among the pomegranate trees and groaned" Aha!' She slams down the lid so quickly, for a sickening moment she thinks she's broken it.

'Okay, okay!' The shadow retreats, leeching out the lightening and the glory, and with tears burning in her throat she backspaces the whole suddenly worthless file. …

And then, just then – 'hey, have you seen the nail-cutter? I can't find – whoa, easy, I just asked you one question!'

∞∞∞

The voices in her head entwine themselves around the gentle rhythm of the ghazal, until her poem enlaces it like a vine. And yet both soar at the same time free, mingling with the sounds of children playing outside, with birdsong and the thrum of cars in the distant road. The door is locked, the softly sputtering fan keeps the room cool, and there is no one to chide the disorder of her dress or correct her posture.

The words come swiftly, almost faster than her ecstatic fingers can churn them out. Later she may shake her head at most of this, roll her eyes … just now, it is perfect. The words come. Life is good.

Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense

The barks of seagulls and dogs egged us on as we stood beside the passerelle named for Senghor, two desis connected by an almost-common origin gulping French fries out of the same cone in an unspoken competition verging on the grim. We had met perhaps twice in our one shared class and would not have called ourselves friends, or even real acquaintances. Yet here we were, gobbling fries bought with our pooled coins. They had the unmistakable aftertaste of spiced mayo and homesickness found nowhere else in the world.

"I'm going to Annecy for the holidays," I said at last, à propos of nothing. "And maybe to Lyon en route."

She scrabbled for another three-finger lot of chips and found instead just the one shrivelled brown crisp, because I had already scooped up the rest. It was not exactly a glare she gave me as she scrunched up the cone and prepared to launch it into the bin, but I grinned triumphantly all the same and only-just buried it in restaurant tissue-paper. Three afro-headed teens racing each other down the clattering planks knocked the paper-ball out of her fingers into the water instead.

"Kaalay." She said, putting the last crisped chip in her mouth.

"What?!"

"That's where I am going. For the holidays."

"Oh. Calais!"

"Yeah, I've always wanted to go there."

"Yeah. Yeah. Me too. I'm thinking I should go there in Feb …" She watched me babbling on in faint annoyance, not realising that I had managed to nail half a dozen -isms to her single word before she had swallowed her mini-bite.

The gulls snarked in my reddening face, and I scowled back at them with interest. Even off the bridge, the world was rocking most ungently under my feet.

House And Home

When I moved into the new house, it began to cry. Every night it would rend its timbers sobbing, and every morning sniffle me a woeful goodbye. No pillows could muffle it, no ear-phones keep it out.

One day I walked over to the hearth and looked at the keening logs. 'What's wrong?' I asked them. 'Is there something I can do to help?'

'For twenty-five years,' answered my hearth. 'Ever since and even before my last brick was laid, I was a home. But now my family is gone, and I am merely a house."

"But you aren't just a house. You're still a home. My home."

The logs crackled into a blue-cindered smile. "I can be your house, my new friend, but I cannot be your home, unless you have someone to share me with."

So it went on weeping, and I wept with it.

How To Stay Alive A Little Longer

1. Don't jump off a bridge or step off a footpath. It won't prove to everyone once and for all that you are sick and tired of everything life quasi-forces upon you: they will only account you weak, selfish, broken. So remember that there is no chocolate icecream in the grave, and remember also that what you really want is to live free, not to die.

2. Don't loathe yourself for not being something out of a self-help book: perfection is not only overrated but boring. Besides, your real problem isn't your wish to be perfect; it's that you are not a perfectionist at all, you're a closet-rebel. It's your guilt over your heart's unabashed refusal to want what it 'should'.

3. Don't think of the abyss as your own fault. It's an injury, a hurt you must nurse until healed, like a new month, a twisted ankle, a sprained wrist or a migraine. It is not a moral failure, and it does not matter who says otherwise.

4. Do read, learn, and write about every gem that comes your way. Language-crumbs like freshly baked croissants, little mango-slices of philosophy, poems of hot chocolate, a story that is a rich pulao laden with steaming meat - devour them all, and then bid others to the feast, for this sustenance grows more ample in the sharing.

5. Do hunt for truth and for beauty and for laughter. Everyday, seek one thing to admire for the starkness of its sincerity, one to love and rejoice in, and one to chuckle over as you do horrid humdrum things. And for each of them, whisper an arigato upwards into the blue of the sky.

Giggles

Mr. Mouche dipped his antenna. "Are you zzzure you are zzzeady for zzzis? Zzzis foe izzz an icon. She hazzz vazzzquished many of zzzour bzzzavest soldierzzz."

"Oh yes, sir." A swipe from an irate pedestrian blew young Musca away, but he was soon back on his wings. "I'm ready, sir."

"Alzzzeady he fozzzgets to buzzz," said Mr. Mouche, raising his ocelli.

"So-zzzory, Zzzir."

"Well Zzzen," said Mr. Mouche. "Do you zzzee zzzat human at zzze window zzzere, with zzze lemon-colured apzzzon and zzze palette? Nezzzt to her, on zzze table, is a zzzlice of cake. You muzzzt dizzztract her zzzo we can eat."

Musca raised his wings in a salute and took off. He hovered above the window-frame for a moment, watching the painter mix different pigments to match the sky's blue. 'Put in more white,' he wanted to say, but realised rather sadly that she would not hear him. Finally he charged, aiming for the ribbon above her ear.

"Oh, d-n, not again!" Paint splashed all over the floor as she reeled from the blow she had dealt to her own head, missing Musca by a clear half-inch, just as the training manual guaranteed. Gritting her teeth, she rolled up three abandoned sketches into a murder-weapon. Musca smiled. Everything was going according to plan. Now if he could just lure her away from the cake –

Bam! The buzzing of Mr. Mouche drew the painter back to the window, and she slammed it shut just before Musca could get out. He shot for the ceiling as she swiped at him

and stumbled, then howled as her toe hit the foot of the table.

"You wait until I catch you, you – There! Hah!" She slapped her ear again as Musca swooped past it. "Just you wait – Please, please, let me catch the wretched – "

Down went the easel as she lunged again, and the canvas became a palm-faced smudge. The painter crouched beside it, raising her sketch-roll at every real and imagined flutter. "Please, let me catch it!" Quite suddenly she began to giggle. "Are you seriously praying for the death of a housefly? Get a grip, woman!"

When humans laughed they were happy, but this one had water coming out of her eyes too. Musca flew down to take a closer look. There was nothing in the manual about – splat!

"It's dead," he heard the painter sob. "Oh thank – I mean, I'm sorry you're dead, fly. But why couldn't you just stay outside?"

"I'm. Not." wheezed Musca as he died, but the human was no longer looking at him. She was watching the other flies buzzing on the window-pane.

Mr. Mouche turned to his swarm. "We have lost anozzzer zzzoung fzzziend to zzzis terrible creature," he buzzed. "Let uzzz retire to mourn him. Tomorrow we shall return to zzze azzzault."

"Can you repent of something you will do again?" Whispered the painter as they flew away. "And if so – how would one paint this repentance? Blood-red? Black? No …"

Glot-Poseurs

Sandwiched between the Poly-Glots glibly mixing three foreign languages in a sentence and the Mono-glots / Only-My-Own-Languages-Glots resolutely refusing to pronounce a single bonjour, we have the Once-Bitten-Glots. Once upon a time, they did love and learn a langue étrangère, despite the uncomprehending stares of their people and the guilt of lavishing more time upon it than upon their own language. They wooed it with vocab-lists, with painstakingly pieced-together phrases and chartloads of perfectly pronounced conjugations. Yet at the last they won only a gentle shell, an Ellen O'Hara where they had sought Ellen Robillard.

It never did spring first and most freely to their hearts, tongues, pens. All the poems and stories they had dreamt of finding in the version originale and discovering in some deeper and more meaningful way obstinately refused to be felt in any language other than the one in which they had first been read. In their own writing too, sentences in the foreign - the ever and ineluctably foreign! - language stayed wooden half-translations bolstered by Linguée. So now, for all their dabbling in half-a-dozen tongues and their Glot-Posing, they shrink inwardly from loving another langue étrangère the way they loved that One, because they live every day with the heartbreak that comes with never-quiteness.

Good Luck, Cousin

Just because you owe someone a little money … thought Sophia bitterly. Cousin Aiza was humming her way past the jasmines, surveying the lawn as though she owned it.

"Good day, Aiza!" Sophia called out, hitching up her scowl into a smile. "It's nice of you to visit us."

"Oh it's lovely to see you, my dear," said Cousin Aiza, raising her eyebrows precisely at the burn in the tablecloth that Sophia had hastily covered with a plate. "But I'm in something of a hurry."

Sophia didn't know if she was glad or sorry the children outside shouting 'goal!' had drowned out her snort. In a hurry, eh? She'd had time enough to dawdle over the flowers.

"Your jasmines are lovely," said Cousin Aiza, and Sophia jumped. But Cousin Aiza was all smiling admiration. "You have quite the green thumb, dear cousin."

"Well," said Sophia, thawing in spite of herself. "The soil is so rich they grow all by themselves. Do take this chair. I'll put on some tea."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly. I simply came over to … I need your help, my dear."

So she HAD come for the money. Sophia wished she could fling the whole in her face, but paltry sum though it was … "I'm rather busy myself," she said. "My mother-in-law is coming tomorrow and I have to tidy up."

"Oh dear. I could take the children home with me for the evening if you like."

And have them grumble at their own mother's cooking for the rest of the week? No thank you. Sophia took a deep

breath. “I can manage. But we’re so short of money just now you’d scarcely believe it.”

“Oh, surely not!” said Cousin Aiza.

“You were in a hurry,” said Sophia, swallowing her rage.

“Oh yes, yes. My dear, could you lend me a tin-cutter?

“I’m afraid we don’t – what?”

“I’ve got a tin of olives expiring tomorrow, and mine’s broken. They’re organic, you see, and quite expensive.”

“A tin-cutter? Is that all?”

“Yes,” said Cousin Aiza. Sophia could have sworn she added under her breath “And I’d bet my life that’s too much.”

The mortification she had been feeling stiffened once more into anger, and Sophia opened the cupboard with a loud bang. This time at least she would wipe the smirk off Cousin Aiza’s face. Then she realised with horror that the neighbours never had sent the wretched thing back.

“Our neighbours …” she began.

“Mama, Mama, Zain’s mother sent these. She says thank you.” It was her son in the very nick of time, with the tin cutter and a bowl she’d quite given up on. Another minute and she’d have missed the boat.

“Well, dear Cousin,” said Sophia, holding out the tin-cutter with a triumphant flourish. “I shan’t keep you if you’re in a hurry.”

“Why are you laughing, Mama?” asked her son, as Cousin Aiza stalked out without once looking at the jasmines.

“Justice,” said Sophia. “Sweet justice.”

Fen of Tales Untold

Wheresoever life blooms still in the Lhann'shoay, the ghosts of unsung sagas hold it close.

On the edge of all edges, in the sleet-white scythe that splits the green of the earth from the blueyellow of the sky they dwell, groping for a place beside younger sisters whom Time the Inexorable Sculptor has not yet finished chiseling. They struggle on, fettered to this earth yet hovering wraith-like above it.

Petty and powerful, merry and bitterly vengeful, drifting solitary or entwined so utterly that the keenest can scarcely detect the alloy, they are petrified into cold, indifferent, moulding oblivion.

The same doom is laid upon them all: to perish and be forgotten. Or so Men deem.

Truly, in the fickle memories of men, writ in fleeting words that fade ere they form, they leave only a wistful shadow ... but words have power. Words have meaning. Words can save stories.

In the gnarled old hands of the Time that tended them they all return to nestle, guarded there for all eternity beyond the ken of Men, while the vessels from which they were once fashioned are poured soulless into the earth by the ravages of the selfsame Tyrant, sunk into decay and loathsomeness and finally to Nothing.

The souls and stories of the dead endure. Some of them are lived anew, by Time's sculptures of flesh and blood. Some become the sagas of the Inkshadow people, of that curious limbo-race that is born of dreams and wilts under Reality's gouging gaze.

All words tell stories, but we cannot read them all.

All stories need words, but we cannot feed them all.

Five Heartbeats

"The Partridges are going to attack us," said the new King of the Eagles. "They have a secret grain that will decimate our nests. We must destroy them."

"Are you sure they have this grain? Are you sure they mean to use it?" demanded the other birds.

"Yes. We must destroy them before they can turn on us," said the King of the Eagles.

"Listen," broke in the forest. "While you squabble, I am dying. Do something. No natural serendipity will save me now."

"Wait," said the Partridges. "Eagles, don't attack us. We do not have this secret grain."

"You lie. We will destroy you." Half the Eagles said. The other half stood perplexed.

"Fine," said the Partridges. "Then come. Let us fight. Let us fight to the death!"

"Save me." said the forest. "Save yourselves. In five more heartbeats we shall all be dead."

"Stop this madness!" cried the other birds. "Eagles, stop it! Do not destroy the Partridges, we beg of you. Please, stop!"

"We must destroy the Partridges," said the Eagles. And indeed they did.

"Four heartbeats," said the forest. "You idiots, you're making it worse."

"So, did you find the secret grain?" The birds asked the King of the Eagles.

"It was not there," He said. "We made a mistake."

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"The Nightingales are going to attack us," said the new King of the Eagles. "They have a secret grain that will decimate our nests. We must destroy them."

"We are ready," said the Nightingales. "We shall not share the doom of the Partridges. We will strike you if you strike us, and we will win.

"Oh dear God no!" groaned the birds of the world. "Not again!"

"Three heartbeats," said the forest. "Will you stop fighting each other and battle the cancers murdering me? There's still time. There's still hope."

"Now we must destroy the Nightingales," said half the Eagles.

"But – remember the last time?" said the other half. "Surely we are not doing this again!"

"Two heartbeats," said the forest. "I'm dying. Help me!"

"I'll let you in on a little secret," said the King of the Eagles to all the birds who were chirping indignantly at him. "I knew the Partridges had no secret grain."

"So then – why – so, the Nightingales do not have it either?" cried the birds.

"I care not," said the King of the Eagles. "We shall destroy the Nightingales. Stand aside or you will be next!"

"One h-heartbeat," croaked the forest. "Please, please listen to me!"

But the birds of the world were cringing in their nests, listening only to the eagles ripping open with their beaks and talons the nests of the dying Nightingales.

"Zero," said the forest.

For Auld Lang Syne à la 21st Cent

'I never would have written to you, if they had not begged me so very hard not to.' Well, praise the Lord for perversity, then! It's been what? Ten years? I guess I ought to have written too, but, you see, no one begged me so very hard not to…

I've not laughed so heartily in all of these last – what is it now? Ten years? Ten years of a casual drifting apart so commonplace it is not even ludicrous. But deucedly awkward all the same. An odd constraint, feeding on silence and distance – spun as slow and sure and deadly as a spider's web – and brushed aside in half a minute, by one hastily scrawled email. Merci!

Life, you say, has been treating you twice as well as you deserve, yet not half as well as you desire. An apt summary of the human condition, i' faith, but it tells me nothing to the purpose! Answer your own delightfully frank question, and tell me what you've been up to, in the plain, trenchant words that best beseem you.

And what have I been up to? Not much, alack. The ardent dreams of splendour and glory that burnt so bright in our youth are rueful embers now, naught more.

'Je suis Sarusai Hiryu, écrivaine ratée, étudiante au chômage'… A paraphrase, and a fairly horrible one. But there you have my life in a nutshell. Oresama, the 'writer', the 'linguist', the acolyte of literature, is at a loss for an original word to say!

And so, farewell. Write back, whether 'they' urge you not to or not.

Earthquake

The sun strode briskly towards its zenith as it always did in the fall, something of the warmth of summer emanating from it still. Farmers welcomed it from their fields with hasty glances at the lush verdure it drew from the obscurity of night to glowing, radiant life, women peered at it out of their houses and dairies, children sang joyously to it as they raced up and down the twisting, winding mountains to their shabby school-house.

In the serene hamlet of Balakot, another day was drawing steadily on. A day like any other, eighth of an October akin to Octobers that had been and Octobers that stretched out before them in a vista of similarly placid years . Until " until the earth itself began to stir, to tremble beneath their feet like some gigantic monster goaded to wrath, began to fling them about and batter them, crush them under the rubble of their own beloved homes, maim and torture and engulf them altogether.

Egg-And-Butter Sandwiches

Your cousin is boiling alphabet pasta for her children. "You used to tease your Mom to make egg-and-butter sandwich-stars? Remember?"

"She always said it was a waste of bread."

Your cousin's smile fades.

When you wake up, you see a plate. With an egg-and-butter sandwich-star on it.

Evolved Elephants

'Elephants never do homework.'

'Elephants never wear mittens'

'Elephants never wash their -'

'What's going on here?' I asked, taking in the gigantic baby-pink elephant freshly taped to the fridge, and the other, even larger one which was being filled in with a concentration and vigour only a six-year-old artist could possess.

'After mermaids, dolphins and seagulls, the kid's developed a pachyderm obsession,' snorted my friend. 'There's no doing anything with her just now. And her father's attitude certainly isn't helping!'

'Well, my dear, if you just left it alone for a little while -'

'See? What did I tell you?'

'I have an idea,' I took out my phone. 'What's her favourite ice-cream flavour?'

'Are we going to have ice-cream? Like, now? Awesome!'

'We are, but elephants never eat ice-cream, remember? They eat grass and tree-bark and things.'

'Oh.' She went back to her elephant-drawing and picked up a grey colour-pencil instead of the pink one worn almost to a stub.

We looked at each other, my friend and I, and discovered to our surprise that instead of the expected triumph we felt all the sheepish self-loathing of baby-mouse murderers.

But then her face cleared up. "This elephant does eat ice-cream," She announced, putting the grey colour-pencil firmly down. 'This one is a new species of elephant, a

'volved one. It only eats ice-cream and pizza and nice things."

And leaving us to wonder whether to laugh or cry, she went back to colouring the elephant baby-pink.

Don't Forget

"Hello, my name is Sarah and I'm –" The swishy Rossetti girl gripped the chair and finished the sentence with a conscious heroism that made Naíla's lips curl. "An Instagram addict!"

"Hello, Sarah" chorused the circle, smiling, none more widely than Naíla. It was the kind of thing that got you bonus points with counsellors and a better report when your mother came snooping. She knew the ropes, even if it was her first day in this new nuthouse. The wretched lot here you could have picked randomly from any social media addiction group in the city: a counsellor, smiling with a forced, vague sweetness; a pasty-faced boy with impossibly green eyes and a stammer, a jumpy child in black, a blue-jeanned boy, and Sarah the Rossetti girl with Righteous Resolve writ large upon her face.

"Soon, I was posting pictures of all my food. Like, literally all of it. Then – I was lunching with my best friend and I almost threw up because I'd taken a bite of my fries before taking a photo. So I – She made me realize I had a problem."

"Thank you Sarah. Would anyone else like to say something?" The counsellor was looking pointedly at Naíla. She stared woodenly back. They could hint at and nudge and worry her, but their own stupid rules forbade them to actually make her do anything.

"H-hang in there, Sarah" piped up the pasty-faced boy – Alain? Good grief, what a name! – with his painfully eager smile, and Naíla rolled her eyes. Of all the fools – couldn't he see the Rossetti-girl was with the blue-jeanned boy? Naíla slid her phone from her pocket into the sleeve

of her gown, and began to scroll her Twitter feed. New counsellors always were dead bores. Oh well.

From the woman's glare as she said, Dolores-sweet "Yes, we're all here to help" Naíla knew that she knew about the Twitter, but this did not worry her unduly. She was here at the insistence of her mother and for no other reason. To have a little peace in the house, that was all. Like every other counsellor, this one would back off in a couple of weeks.

Now it was the girl in black who was speaking "Hi, I'm Alicia. I can't stop checking my gmail. I write – stuff, and I've sim-subbed – simultaneously submitted – my thirty-three poems to ten magazines each, and now I can't stop checking my email, because I'm scared I'll get an acceptance."

"Eh?" That did draw Naíla out of 'Ten Natural Tips for Removing Pimples' posted by a visibly spotty woman. It seemed to have had much the same effect on the others: everyone was staring at the furiously blushing girl "I mean – like – if two of them accept the same poem before I've had time to notify one and then that one blacklists me and they tell all the other journals, then I'll never have a poem published and I'll die with everything unread, and no one will ever –" She buried her head in her hands.

There was no thank you chorus this time. Even the counsellor looked bemused. Naíla realised in some exasperation that it was as usual left to her to state the obvious. "Look, I don't think you have an addiction to checking your email. If you submit each poem to ten places, obviously you'll have to keep track! And if that's bothering you, send each poem to fewer magazines, okay? Someone is bound to publish them sooner or later, right? Even the

most complete drivel gets published these days, and besides, you're not even that good –"

"Naíla!" That was decidedly more rattled-homeroom-teacher than perpetually-chill-addiction-group-counsellor. The pasty-faced boy smothered a giggle and tugged his collar straight. Naíla smirked triumphantly. But then she saw Alicia gaping at her with the uncomprehending pain of a snared rabbit in her twitching face, and something very like compunction smote her. Shamefacedly she googled and tweeted the 'before you say something, ask your self is it true, is it kind etc.' quote, fiddling with the vowels to make it all fit into one tweet. Once she could be fairly sure Alicia could not answer because the blue-jeanned boy had started talking about his Facebook feed-scrolling habit, she mouthed grudgingly, "Sorry". As for him – funny, she could have bet he was a Tweeter too.

Her battery died with a ping that drew his listeners' eyes to her, and in spite of her defiant scowl it sent a flush creeping up her neck. Interrupted by their straying eyes, the blue-jeanned Facebook-boy looked up. His thumb twitched as though scrolling, and Naíla choked back a laugh. What a dork. She dodged the counsellor's glare by fixing her eyes on the dead screen of her own phone. There was no feed there, only her right thumb, moving absently upwards like a wind-screen wiper –

No. Oh no. It was true then. All of it. Everything her mother had said, and her friends – when she still had three friends 'irl' and only a hundred followers. But it was the memory of her brother's face when she had snatched her phone from him that morning that made her yawn elaborately to give her a reason to wipe her eyes. And so, as they were all chanting the next thank you, Naíla

decided, quite seriously, that she would stand up when Dolores next asked who wanted to share. And later, she promised herself, she would buy her brother a huge box of chocolates to say sorry and spend the evening helping her mother with chores.

But the hour was over, and the counsellor, revived by the end-of-session beep, was already summing up. "If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to text or email me, or post them in our closed Facebook group. Remember, I'm always available. Those of you who are new or haven't done so yet, please don't forget to follow us on Twitter and Insta for updates about our next session

Do As You Are Told

The Beginning:

'Why can't we play with the kids next door?'

'They're not like us. Their kind will destroy our country!'

'But they seem really nice.'

'Do as you are told! Or else.'

Twenty Years Later - Ending 1

'Burn it down. Shoot the vermin if they try to resist.'

'No!'

'Do as you are told! Or else.'

'No.'

'You are charged with dereliction of duty and disobedience in the field -'

'We refused to kill innocent people!'

'That is no excuse. The order was inviolable and you knew it. Hang them!'

Twenty Years Later - Ending 2

'Burn it down. Shoot the vermin if they try to resist.'

'But -'

'Do as you are told! Or else.'

'Fine ...'

'You are charged with the slaughter of innocents and the destruction of property -'

'We did as we were told!'

'That is no excuse. The order was immoral and you knew it. Hang them!'

The End.

Dragon will Soar

In the sunsoaked russet-green hills of Ycenna, in these pretty colinettes with twinkling green slopes cloaked ever so gently by winter, there is a contented exquisiteness of blue-green lakes and rivers the size of a rue. It is a world of plenty, fecund and joyous, in which the promise of ecstasy whimpers and dies unfulfilled.

I want to see mountains again, Gandalf, mountains ... Here on the rim of this solicitously nursed chateau, the highest pinnacle this softly sloping land will afford me this day, I gaze down upon row after row of little boxes made ever so very charmingly out of the comeliest ticky tacky, and somewhere in the dragon-clouds upon the horizon the wild siren-song stirs.

Capricious, whimsical, they tease themselves into echoes of those sky-piercing crests, and fain would I leap forth now from this mould-dimmed rock, letting the wind cradle me until my wings are unfurled, ready to bear me hence.

To bear me unto the Once Upon a Time where true mountains dwelt, where one swore without irony to be good and noble and true for evermore. Where the dream-castles quakingly begun in the smoggy air of the plains became the only dwellings for our souls, so that afterwards when we returned to scurrying upon the belly of the earth our souls yearned for them, with a strangled inarticulate longing that did not know its own name.

I shall spread out my wings and sail into the sky, into the Beyond where no bus will take me, heedless at last of bookings and baguettes, far, far away from this staid cloying loveliness that rends my heart by its resemblance to the realm that it is not.

And there in that realm, in the glory and the lightening of the soul of the world, I shall cry out in chorus to its crescendo until every fibre of my being is attuned to its immortal quiver. An eagle prey to the sheer wildness of its castle, a dragon whose fire burns always within, consumed, become wholly a vessel of that supreme and unsurpassed beauty that will ravage the depths of its being, yet bring it a strange obliterating bliss of which easier, cheerier worlds know naught.

Over the sea, enormous, enticing, utterly alien, I will soar, and over the plains, lying placid and unremarked like bread underneath the pizza of the world; over deserts with the cruel sparse promise of a half-grown bud choked by thorns; over the forests with their abundance of danger and of delight – until I come finally upon my pine-tressed rivages scything their way right into the heavens.

Drapes and Dust

She fell out of the frayed brown paper, a short square woman in a sari, clutching a man's suitcase with the broken handle crushed into her fist so that appearances were almost saved. The bleakness of the room leapt out of the tinted daguerreotype, as did the homely strength of her, the pixyish triangle of her chin and her flat cheekbones and the hook of her nose, the fixed little smile grim with oft-spoken resolve.

Upon the flip side of the yellowing card my grandmother had written a single word in her firm round hand. I rolled my tongue around it, tested it. India. When we were children, and there were no led lights, no UPS, only candles and families united by hapless rage when WAPDA cut off our electricity yet again, we used to play Name-Place-Animal-Thing. And suddenly I was playing it again, my own twisted version of it that always annoyed my brothers so much. Instead of picking a Name and a Place and an Animal and a Thing, I would pick one and make it be all of them, a thinganimalplace name.

Thing: a piece of yellowing cardboard locked away in an old lady's chest. Animal: a tigress at afternoon tea. Place: my grandmother's homeland, our stranger-enemy-friend-neighbour. Or Name, India, like Katie-Scarlett's sister-in-law, like the chopped-up woman from Nigel Kelly, lying on the page like salami slices beside the paragraph describing backlash after the first partition of Bengal. Or perhaps it was all of them at once.

It was in my Grandma's desk-drawer that I first found the crumbling envelope, one summer's day when I crept upstairs to ferret around the old rooms, shrouded now in sackcloth drapes and dust. Under the sturdy wooden lid of

this desk, the Hamunaptra of my childhood, opened now at twenty-one with all the guilty thrill of a grave-robber, the brown envelope lay among the scattered memorabilia of an old woman's life, a full century of hopes and dreams and good wishes. Thimbles, mini-reels of thread, pressed flowers blackened now with age, a ribbon-bound collection of old Eid and birthday cards, crayon and pencil drawings labelled in proud childish scrawls … and, inside the envelope, India.

Carefully I wiped the dust off her with the tip of my little finger, and carried her down to my mother. It was summer then, and she was swaying slightly back and forth in time to the creaking of the fan as she sat cross-legged under it, peeling and slicing potatoes for lunch. I touched her lightly on the shoulder and held out the photograph cupped awkwardly in my right palm. Mama dragged her fluttering hair off her face with the back of her wrist and frowned up at me. "Who's that?" She asked. "Where did you find that photo?"

"Upstairs. In – in Grandma's old desk. There's just the one word at the back. India." Name-Place-Name-Place-Name-Place, I thought, like a cartoon-princess with a loves-me-loves-me-not daisy. Name-Place-Name-Place-Thing-Name.

My mother peeled a potato whole, spinning it along the edge of her knife like a blacksmith tempering the edge of a sword on his wheel, only faster. She sliced the misshapen yellow lump neatly into eighths and tossed them into the bowl in front of her. I squirmed. I should have been helping her. There was a knife lying pointedly idle on my side of the divan. But every time I tried to help I took off huge chunks of potato with the peel and I could never slice

it evenly. The haft of the knife dug into my hand, making it ache, or it wriggled its way around and bit into my thumb, and the clucks of consternation and the wondering what was to become of me would begin ... So I never touched potatoes without a direct order. Mama glared at me as she picked up another one, but she said nothing.

"India?" I asked again, speaking uncertainly into the silence. India's picture had been locked away in a drawer in an old desk, not displayed proudly downstairs with a story that was gladly retold for each generation. Maybe there would be no answer, maybe the answer was not meant for me. I could see the stiffening in my mother's frame, the slight reddening, and already I had begun to retreat.

"India?" She too spoke the name wonderingly, testingly, as I had done in the dust upstairs. "I didn't know there was a photograph of her."

Her. Name then. India NameNotPlace. Real name, nickname? A name chosen for a beloved child out of homesick nostalgia in a far-off land? A sobriquet bestowed perhaps as a joke, by sisters and friends? A taunt? But no – in my grandmother's youth India was still to be loved, not insulted.

"She was – let me see – she was the wife of one of your grandmother's cousins, but we children never had much to do with her. I must have met her only once or twice, at family weddings and at funerals or something."

India. Not Khaala or Chaachi or Maami India but just - India. "Grandma's – cousin, right?" I hazarded. "Were they close to each other?"

"Cousin's wife."

Cousin's wife. Not blood then, not kin-bound to us. Nevertheless, Grandma had kept her photograph locked away in her private desk. By the time I came to know her, my grandmother's legendary razor-blade ruthlessness had mellowed into a smiling wisdom that took no nonsense from anyone; but the woman in the picture was still well under forty. My grandmother had more friends than most people have kinsfolk, and they were all displayed proudly in her albums, with their names, dates, cities and stories. All these years, India, the cousin's wife, had lain locked away in the drawer of her private desk. Why?

"Her cousin's wife. Was she, like, from Lahore?"

"No. From somewhere in South India."

"South India? So her family moved to Lahore?"

Mama slid a row of potato cubes into the bowl under her palm, sucking in her cheeks to hide what looked suspiciously like a grin. I could not help flushing as I realised how flat my awkwardly devious attempt at dissimulating curiosity had fallen. My clumsiness seemed to have touched her, though, opened her up where more adroit questioning would have failed. She picked three small potatoes out together out of the bowl, and set one of them to the knife's edge.

"Raju Mamoo was Naani-Jaan's brother's eldest son. His mother died when he was a child, and his father married again. Raju Mamoo was never very close to his step-mother or half-sisters, only to his father."

"And his father married him to India?"

"Of course not! He sent him abroad to live with a friend of his, on the understanding that he would be given a job there and marry his host's daughter once he settled in."

It was that 'of course not!' I wanted to delve into, but no askable question would frame itself there. So I held fast to the thread of the story, and waited.

"They were engaged. Just like that?"

"It was a common enough arrangement at the time … and it wasn't an engagement, exactly. It was all understood and agreed upon; but it was not fixed and it was certainly never announced. Which was just as well."

"Why? What happened?" I blurted. "India?"

The knife went rather still against the potato for a few seconds, during which I looked just about anywhere except at my mother. In my imagination whirled the steamy-tragic story of a wonderfully complex triangle, with the young man sent forth to his unseen bride, the secluded maiden awaiting his coming, and – India … the steel arrested in the act of baring yolkyellow potato-flesh had brought my reverie to a most discomfiting halt.

"No. There was another girl who lived nearby. Raju Mamoo followed her home, and he - sang."

"He sang."

"A movie song … Dila thair ja, yaar ka nazara lain de. His host could not allow such an affront to his daughter's honour, so he sent Raju Mamoo back home."

"So where does India come into it?"

"India – she was either divorced then, or widowed; none of us ever knew – was on her way to her parents' home in Karachi, where she had left her children. Instead – they turned up together at Uncle Raju's home in Lahore. His father – well, he accepted the situation."

An elopement – and not with the maiden in the ivory tower, but with a divorced-widowed mother of small children! It would explain all the silences, and my mother's

carefully casual tone as she sort-of broke them a little to draw her daughter inside them too. Her voice held no trace of shock or righteous anger or condemnation; just a hint of derision for Raju Mamoo making such a cake of himself, and a warm sympathy for Raju Mamoo's father, who had accepted with good grace what he could not prevent. As for India - this lightly shrugged disapproval must have damned India from the outset.

"She was dark, India," My mother said inconsequentially, and I knew she was wondering the same thing as I, though neither of us would have voiced it for the world. "A hindustani. Dark as burnt coal, and she had a scar on her left cheek that twitched when she spoke."

The daguerreotype in my hand did not reveal these dread blemishes; but the stern, homely features were quite irreconcilable with the femme fatale character of her legend. In Uncle Raju's boyhood pictures there were only traces of a slouching washed-out handsomeness, and he had grown into a stooping man with thick round glasses on his nose. Where was the dashing black sheep who serenaded demoiselles in the street? These two running across the fields into each other's arms, these two walking hand in hand, these two twirling across a dance floor à la Disney - I shuddered. Each image of romance they turned into the most utterly bizarre mockery. And yet, some hint of that magic I could not separate from the satiny twirl of a crinoline there must have been between them, once upon a time.

"A hindustani girl married into a family of kashmiris - and married in such a way! Was she – was she – happy?"

"They say she never looked back, though she and Raju Maamoo were very poor, so poor that her children – she

had some six or seven – barely seem to have gone to school."

When Cinderella married, when Ariel found her Prince, they lived ever after in castles. They were heroines; they were beautiful and splendid and happy. India lived in a hovel and raised half a dozen children in poverty and illiteracy. And they said she was happy too. But didn't she mind? Didn't she care that her life was ruined and her children's lives too?

"But what was her real name?" I said finally, as though the name would tell me everything I could not ask. "Her name can't have been India."

"Maybe it wasn't her name, but that was what everyone called her – India. They say your grandmother gave her the name, and it stuck, so that no one ever called her by the real one except to her face."

"And you don't remember her real name?"

"No."

So her name would not find me the placeanimalthing. Thing then. A thing from her past that would give her a nameplaceanimal.

"She had six or seven children with Raju Maamoo – so what about the children from her first marriage, the ones she was going back to when she met him?"

"I don't know. She never went back. Maybe she did write to them, call them: maybe she did not. There were no mobiles then, and no Skype. And they were poor."

She spoke matter-of-factly, baldly, and that took me aback more than anything else. If a woman lived in a different city with a man not their father, did that make it natural for her to simply let her children go? What kind of

woman would abandon her children for a coup de foudre, for a grotesque mockery of happiness in a slum?

"Why did she send them to her parents in the first place?" I demanded. I flung the poisoned thought away from me, but it tarnished the halo I would fain have drawn around her, this buried not-ancestress of mine – India, the unlikely romantic. Was that blazing strength no more than heartlessness? But then, what kind of evil seductress spends half a lifetime below the poverty-line for her victim's sake?

"She was in Kenya when her husband died – or left. That's where she must have gotten her British nationality – "

I jumped. "India was a British National? But then – why didn't she go to England? Her children could have studied there, and she could have worked – "

"They say she always longed to go. She used to say that she could have gone there in state, without a visa, like Queen Elizabeth herself." And upon my mother's face flickered the shadow of my grandmother's derisive-yet-admiring grin, so that for a moment there I was watching both of them look at India. "Your Grandma and her sisters – sometimes they used to call her "Malka Elizabeth" when they spoke of her."

Across the potatoes our eyes met, and suddenly we both burst out laughing. That pugnacious dignity under a crown, combined with that hook of a nose and the preposterous chin – Good Lord! And yet, there was a poignancy, a grandeur even, in the very absurdity of the picture which prevented us from laughing very much.

"Well, why didn't she go?"

"Her husband remained adamant that he would not leave his father. When his father died, he became even more firmly attached to this land that held his father's grave."

"And India stayed with him."

"Always." My mother's voice was reluctantly admiring and mocking all at once. "After Raju Mamoo died, she did go to England."

"Did she? But she must have been ancient by then!"

"She went to England. Alone. She found work there, and sent the money home to her children, until they had saved enough to build two mansions in the Walled City here in Lahore."

"Two mansions? Then she did find her first children again!"

"No, the mansions both belong to Raju Mamoo's children … They are still there, in Akbari Mandi. They stand out from the rest of the neighbourhood, because they are five storeys high. Although," She added. "Maybe she did send money to her first children too. Nobody really knows."

"Why not? You even know the name of the song Raju Maamoo sang for that girl in the street, but you don't know anything about India's children?"

Mama shrugged. "Well, they emigrated years ago, and even when they were here we never had much to do with them. Her sons got visas as skilled labour – "

"As skilled labour?!"

"Yes – they never got much of an education … She had a daughter too, who was unmarried and illiterate, and they say India tried for years to get her a visa."

"And she got it?" I asked eagerly.

"No. The daughter lived in Akbari Mandi until she died."

"And India lived in England."

"She came back to visit her daughter, but yes, she lived in England."

Mama took the basket of potatoes, all peeled and sliced, and went inside the kitchen. Through the kitchen door I could see her washing the potatoes, the grime flowing away under the cool clear jet of water, revealing her delicate hand with the finger-tips shrivelled like Puramina's prince. And I saw India doing the same thing, lifting the lid of the pan, then stirring the heady gravy inside it, flicking up a sliver to taste it, putting in the potatoes, one handful after the next.

In the flat hardness of those plain jutting cheekbones, those dark sallow features, I could not see the mother, or the wife – only the woman, and then not even her … Who was she, what was she like, this half-named woman from nowhere? Did she cook with my mother's innate grace, or did she spill and splash and swear like me? Did she hack chunks out of potatoes when she peeled them?

In my notebook, in my own code, I wrote down her name. Then I wrote it in English: India. And then I wrote it in Urdu, as she must have written it if she learnt to write at all: انڈیا. I longed to write something of this lady, this not-quite-ancestress I had unearthed, a potential heroine for one of those forgotten historical women biopics. Downstairs in the family album where all my foremothers and forefathers lived, every picture had its history, its place in time; a steady passing of the lantern from one generation to the next from which she had been uprooted, set aside. We think back through our mothers if we are

women. Downstairs there were dozens of foremothers for me to think back through, yet here lay India, timeless, unageing, dried and relaxed and mounted in a grotesque parody of a butterfly pinned to a wall.

What could I write of her when I scarcely knew what to think? England was El Dorado to her, but she gave it up … A woman who stuck by her man was supposed to be a heroine in our legends, but they had all laughed at India – perhaps she just wasn't beautiful enough to be a heroine. And what about the children? The children from her first marriage, and Raju Mamoo's children too, whom she suffered to grow up in poverty without an education, when she could have taken them to England –

Didn't she care? I stared at India, trying to see her truly, clearly – was this a devoted wife, a noble lady heroically faithful to her duty, or a wanton who had seduced a young boy, a callous mother with no care to her children? She had not cleaved to him out of weakness, if in her middle-age she could still go to England and send home enough money to build two mansions five storeys high. It was something else entirely. And I could not see it, I could not understand –

My Grandmother, so fierce on the subject of her own children's' education - had India's neglect not revolted her? What had she seen in India, what sort of woman did she believe her to be? If she had liked and respected India, then her photograph should have been downstairs; if she had not, why had she kept it in her desk? Some strange memory was at work there – a half-guilty respect, a contempt and frustration leavened by a dash of wonder, like my own?

"Why isn't she in Grandma's family albums instead of her desk?" Some questions ask themselves, just like that, and then you blush for them later in spite of yourself.

My mother came out drying her hands. "Well, she was never exactly family."

She had 'six or seven' children with my grandmother's cousin and she stayed with him despite abject poverty until he died. But to my mother who accounted second cousins twice removed close kin, India was never exactly family.

Then she saw my notebook, and that strained trying-not-to-yell-at-you frown creased trenches into her face again. "Writing that gibberish again? Do something constructive! If you must draw scratchy wriggles, practice your Chinese."

"I am doing something constructive," I said. "I am writing."

"Then write it in decent English, so that it will at least improve your handwriting! This nonsensical twisted caricaturing is a pure waste of time."

Just then aspersions upon my coded diary-writing that would one day unleash my saga of The Land of The Lost upon the world had no power to sting. Before me lay a greater mystery than my mother's refusal to understand that an invented alphabet or a real one would make no difference to the words enclosed. I picked up the notebook, and slipped India inside it.

My mother had already settled herself down on the divan with her tasbeeh, a pillow under her head, dupatta draped lightly over her hair, eyes half-shut. Before she could begin whispering the durood I said quickly:

"Is India still alive? Or did she die in England?" She must, if she was still alive, be ancient – a hundred, at least, if not more. In a foreign land across the sea, upon which I might never set foot myself. And for all that googling and facebooking could do, I still needed her name, her other name, the name they had chosen not to remember her by.

"I don't know," Answered my mother. "I've never heard anything about her dying ... but she must be dead now. No one has heard anything from her in years."

We think back through our mothers ... But, Virginia, what happens when we do not know how to name our mothers, how to find them? What happens when we do not know if they count as our mothers at all?

Downstairs in the family album wrapt in its gold-thread-worked covers, I slid her boldly in beside a picture of my grandmother and her sisters. On the pieces of brown envelope I wrote the pieces of her story as I had found them, in Urdu and Punjabi – her mother-tongue and mine – and slid it in too. For me she is murky linen excavated from the closet; but because I have done this, for my daughter and my granddaughter and her daughter after her, India, with all her mystery and ambivalence, will be a part of their history, one of their mothers-to-think-back-through.

Cherries

The cherries. Ah yes. Someone must guard the King's cherries, to make sure no poisoner may reach them. But the guard, naturally, deserves some recompense ...

He popped the first cherry into his mouth, squinting out of the narrow gap between window and shutter at all the rich idiots pea-cocking outside, preening and showing off their glossy feathers under the golden rays of the evening sun.

He popped the second cherry into his mouth. The leathery feeling on his tongue was quite gone now, and indeed his mouth was watering freely. Some might even have said it was foaming -

The spider on the ledge across the gardens put away his telescope and sighed. Another witless fool dead. And the cherries. What a waste. The cherries ...

Cloud Dragons

Homesickness and farsickness, one longing melting into the other, on the tongues of soap-welts rising slowly on wipered windscreens. The life of the adventurer and exile is a medallion of yin and yang, of fernweh and hiraeth, of the spirits of the ocean and the moon locked in their eternal waltz. It is your life too, eternally fused and everlastingly halved that you are, and so you stare at the dawn and wonder.

As the blue, blue sky steals the faces of the cloud dragons, consuming them to feed its dreadfully placid vastness, you wonder, as you did when you read of Rousseau's children, abandoned in the dead of the night by the man who wrote Emile: in the tug of war between blood and ink, soul and glory, which one was his true treason? Which one shall be mine?

Breadwinner

They cast him out, the superfluous one, the un-needed one, the one whose crime it was to be one-too-many. He spent the days sighing under swishing trees, mourning his way along the length of rivers and lakes, reading taunts into the cackling of the geese. His were all the words and the only words in that vast, vast expanse; but supremacy must have a smarting audience, or the exultation ebbs limply away. Blind to the lucence of moon and star, deaf to the whispers of water and leaf, he yearned for laughter and tears warmer and more other than the echoes of his own. Then came the day when he was he was cast out no more, for he was needed: to work, to earn, to grind and be ground. 'Cast me out again,' he says now, looking each morning at the swishing trees through the wire-mesh on his narrow, steel-barred window, smiling to hear the geese cackle back their old mockeries. Now he remembers only the beauty and peace he scarcely saw then, and above all, the freedom, the glorious, glorious freedom! He closes his eyes resolutely against all memory of the yawning abyss, the near-hell of absolute solitude, lest it find him here too. Loves, fears, and longings, holding him together and pulling him apart, all stem from the same shadows now, from the same exile that seems sometimes never to have existed and sometimes never to have ended. 'Oh, cast me out again!', he says. But he dares not say it aloud.

Bring A Veil For The Sun

"We must dim the sun," The mother squinted up as she adjusted her torn shawl to make a few more inches of shade. They had spent the nights shivering and stumbling aimlessly, the days squirming as they crouched under her pitiful makeshift tent. She had scoured the vast brown expanse for a shoot or shrub, for a trace of water, for a rat or lizard to catch and kill. There was nothing.

“Dim the sun,” she said again. Prayer or resolve, it was barely a croak, but the child caught it.

"How will you dim the sun, Mama?" The dust coating his parched skin like salt had not yet shaken his faith in his mother.

Once upon a time – last week – she had looked out wistfully from the palm trees around her home as she rocked him to sleep, yearning to lose herself in the desert's wild beauty. She had imagined herself racing to glory on a fierce black stallion. But the dashing warriors were all gone, and if they did return they would find only ruins.

“Mama, look! Water!”

“There's nothing there,” she said. “The light plays – ” she stopped. “No, I see it now. It’s an oasis. The men are coming towards us.”

“To help,” she added quickly, as the child flinched. “They are bringing dates, and milk.”

“And something to dim the sun?”

“Yes,” whispered the mother, cradling the still little head, smiling into the eyes looking at her with absolute trust. “Something to dim the sun.”

Bruised

Last night when climbing the stairs in the dark, I slipped, hit my face against a wall, and bruised it. Bruised it with a thick black wedge like a blueberry cheesecake slice right above the left cheekbone. I winced and swore but thought no more of it: when you live alone your dreams are not disturbed just because an idiot of a wall decides to slash your face. Until I reached the metro station this morning, and it suddenly became my new visual identity card.

Here I am, beskirted and bescarved, brown-skinned and Muslim, humming Kashmiri ballads with a bruise on my face. Until the silence starts to strangle the words in my throat. In every eye that I encounter or that flies mine sheepishly, I begin to see something new. Pity. Sympathy. Outrage. Derision. Shame. Disgust … 'Husband? Father? Brother?' I can read the questions – and the answers – in their gazes even before a white Aunty with a ribbon on her coat whispers "You know, here in Europe, you can get help ..."

I can read in their eyes, the fixed ones and the fleeing, that by my clumsiness I have condemned my race, religion, and family to judgments as instant and irrevocable as the sizzling of flesh cast upon a brazier. I bruised my face and now they think one hundred thousand different things, all except for the truth, the unbelievable truth, so banal it's pure cliché – I fell on the frigging stairs. For the first time in my life, I find myself wishing I wore makeup, not ordinary makeup that could never hide a wall-stain, but thick lead paint like Elizabeth I, or perhaps a burka that would just swallow me whole.

Buy Me A Magic Mirror

“If Your Majesty alludes to Judges, I would say Shoe String, or perhaps Cold Pipes. If we speak of complexions, the snowman your step-daughter and her friends have built would appear to be – oh dear, the young ladies have had a falling-out, and our erstwhile pristine friend is much bespattered. If beauty be your meaning, the cook's newest baby is the loveliest little person in the Kingdom.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” groaned the Wicked Queen, crouched in an obscure alley of the royal park with her most trusted lady-in-waiting, her Wicked Queen's Wimple rather ineptly tucked under a housemaid's shawl. “Snow White, you moronic Mirror! Snow White is the fairest of them all!”

“A freckled tween with a crooked nose? Madam, I would be the laughing stock of every Magic Mirror Convention in the land! I – here she comes now!"

“Hallo, Stepmama,” said Snow White "Hallo, Mirror, you old rogue. Stepmama, whatever are you hiding here for? Papa's looking for you. Stepmama, what are you wearing? Is this to be the new court headdress? Ooh, I love it!”

“Madam,” said the Wicked Queen. “I believe I have several times requested you not to call me that.”

“But Papa says I should.”

“You are dismissed, Madam!”

“All right, Stepmama, but Papa’s looking for you.”

The Queen cast a fuming look at Snow White, abandoned her inadequate disguise, and strode back up the park to the castle. Snow White turned to the grinning mirror.

“What's with her?”

“Her potions say she is going to have a daughter, which means you will inherit the throne. Ah, if only your dear mother had lived!”

“Well, I don't remember Mama, though from what you and Great Heart the hunter tell me, she must have been awfully nice.” said Snow White wistfully. “I do wish Papa wouldn't die, though.”

“But he is dying, my dear,” said the Mirror. “And the Wicked Queen wants me to declare you the fairest maiden in the land.”

“She – what? Why?”

“To have a Wicked Reason, I suppose, that she can present to the Guild of Wicked Queens as her justification for ousting you. She might break me, if I do not say it. For your sake, I would risk that, but I doubt –”

“Oh no!” said Snow White. “You mustn't do that! But do try to hold out as long as Papa's alive. I can handle Meanie Queenie, but I don't want his peace cut up by the squabbling, especially while he’s dying.”

“But what shall I say that will not vex her further?”

Snow White giggled. “I have an idea.”

Scarcely an hour later, the Wicked Queen placed the magic mirror against the park-alley’s rock barrier again, and put twelve large pebbles in front of it. “Mirror, mirror on the wall,” she said, fingering the heaviest one. “Who is the fairest of us all?”

“Why, you, Your Majesty!” squeaked the Magic Mirror.

For a moment the Wicked Queen looked as though she really would throw the rock. Instead, she turned to her lady-in-waiting. “Go buy me a mirror that knows how to lie,” she said.

A Feather from a Secret World

Before it can be written as a seamless whole, every snippet of its shadow that can be caught must be pinned to paper. Nakushita. The Land of the Lost…You're wrong there. Lose yourself it, and you'll find your way through. But can you do it? Can you trust, you who lie hourly to yourself and all the world besides? Can you, do have faith enough to let go? To not be in control?

Set a trap for the phoenix, the Simurgh, the Soulbird, who dwell higher than the arc of mortal bows… String the net of words, warp and weft… and watch over the trap, hour after hour. Watch it wear out and decay, ever empty.

For many years they came, uncalled and ever welcome. The Eyrie was your home then, and the dovecote too. For you loved beauty and did not covet it…

God loved birds. He made trees. Man loved birds. He made cages…

All lands were yours, because you did not own any of them.

It had to end. Time would not stay at the behest of joy, any more than it will fly faster for sorrow… Thus the mad, eternally doomed chase, with the many-stringed net of words.

Now wuthering, now silent, the phoenix hovers… ever, ever, will it elude thee, poor hunter. When your despair is at its darkest, your anguish nigh beyond bearing, it will gently let fall one feather. One splendid, glorious feather that you have leave to carry into your own world, to call your own.

A feather from a phoenix from a secret world.

Aye. You can see it. Feel it. Bury it. Burn it.

The feather. You can buy it, sell it, use it to mop spilt ink. Or you can dream the dream every silken leaf ,quivers with… and yearn anew for the phoenix never to be yours.

You cannot catch him, or sway his will

You cannot reach him

You can only hunt and pray and wait. Wait for the pan to extinguish and the feather to light the candle-flame of hope in your heart again… Search, little bird. Search, for what art thou but the search?

Agerasia Of The Heart Is A Terrible Thing

You braided your hair bright red forever and then bound it up differently every day. You clicked and unclicked your pen as you read. You read novels I like, and that made something leap and sparkle between us, though we never even said bonjour. You had no name, only a tagline: 'the girl with the lip-piercing who sits behind me in linguistics'. You were not my friend, and I was not yours, but like the sheen on the edges of stained-glass windows, you made my world a little less dull, a little less empty, a little less devoid of kindred spirits not wholly imaginary. What drove you to erase your comforting flicker of humanity from the world?

No, you were not my friend. So why am I left trying to plug in holes in all the places where you used to be? If instead of: 'she cut her wrist and is in hospital', they had only said, as they wanted so very much to do: 'she has gone south for a few weeks', would I have missed you then? There would have been the same holes, but would I have cared? Do I care now that you are dying? Perhaps what I feel is a selfish sadness, not for you at all but for me. Maybe all I care about is naming and reclaiming the emptiness you left behind, lest it swallow me too, like a crack in the earth avid to feed on fresh flesh before it closes again.

A Guide To Going Off Your Rocker

Step 1: Prepare to spend each quarantine-morning locked in mortal combat with all the winged vermin in the city. Every time you open the window, some miserable flies will start hovering by it. Sooner or later one will get past the curtain and start buzzing about your face.

Step 2: Trip over everything trying to kill the wretched thing, potentially hurting yourself and breaking the furniture.

Step 3: Pray, curse and scream as you chase it for an eternity. Basically, turn into a hysterical blubbering vegetable.

Step 4: Kill it, at long last. Feel wild triumph and joy plus drown in guilt at being so happy about murdering a fellow creature.

Step 5: Fall into a cry-laughing despair and be racked by the ludicrous pettiness and the futility of it all.

Step 6: Have lurid nightmares and wake up with screams trapped in your throat.

Step 7: Try to tell someone, anyone – but fail. Because you know they will laugh at you, if not to your face then later. And why should they not? It is all in your own head and you can't help laughing. And even your own laughter hurts. So –

Step 8: Tell everyone, milking each story for maximum comic effect. Laugh first, laugh loudest, laugh longest. Laugh so much that everyone else sobers up.

A Limbo of One

My soul is lost. I can't find it there anymore…

There is a shard of something stuck in my soul. A small piece of petrified, broken-off soul, like a splinter of a shell stuck in a war-wound that will not let it heal.

But then, what would you? A soul cannot be probed. It cannot be hacked away.

An it were, what would be left?

The liver can heal itself even if you take out a whole lobe.

But this – is a soul. Can a soul do that?

Always The Story Has Power

The story has power.

Always the story has power, if it is told with enough faith.

The story runs thus.

Once upon a time, there was a wretch perched upon a tree that cringed lower into the ground with every passing second, quaking as she watched the ravening wolf below grow ever more fearsome and menacing. Upon the very crescendo of her terror she leapt down and struck the head from the shoulders of her suddenly diminished foe. She met many more wolves, and she slew them all. Never again did she sit trembling upon a shrinking tree.

The story runs thus.

Always the story has power, if it is told with enough faith.

The story has power.

Ameno Ameno Ameno

When first I climbed out into to this Land of do-as-you-please, it was an Inkdeath that I would fain have guarded against, for I deemed it quite inevitable: how can the Inkspell fail, thought I, when you spend more of your life within it than without? Lorenzaccio … but it was not so. This land remains the half-dream it always was, a Middle Earth one steps into for adventures, while that Land of the Lost scarce-glimpsed now from the top of the Magic Faraway Tree remains so starkly real, so starkly mine.

Every time I say a 'Bonjour' or hear one said to me, a voice at the back of my brain goes something like 'Tintatintin. Studio 100, Page 97, Exercice 4, Dialogue 1' ... Nothing matters quite so much here, or in quite the same way. People, places – there is a veil of words that makes them not-quite-real even though they be living flesh and stone. I suppose I might never have noticed this, had I not, for the space of a heartbeat, slid down the slippery-slip and out again into The Land of the Lost.

The food, the language, the grit, the stench – all of it springs completely, effortlessly into existence: what you say and what you do and what you are suddenly means something, because your own Fellowship is there. And then you go north, true North where the mountains are, and you know the Land of the Lost is forever your one vérité, even if everything in it cries out: "You? You've always been a tourist here, you just didn't know it." Of that city I call my own I know less than nothing – were I to live in it for another hundred years I would know less than nothing still – and yet it is my 'real' world to the core as no other place can be. To return to it is no Homecoming even,

because it is easier than snapping a book shut and as complete as being Recalled to Life.

There lies our Kingdom of the Last Room, and the Fellowship of the Ring that was born within it, scattered now, yes, but not broken. There we have food, actual food: mangoes, biryani, barbeque, fish, naan-cholay, shwarma, siri-paye … this list goes on forever. And my books, my own Strong City of Stories, my fortress against everything: the memory of it must hold me sane now, and the knowledge that it is always all there for me, waiting … except, is it? Or will Time steal it from me while I dream?

I love this Magic-Faraway-Tree Land of mine. This is a story I want to read – and write – unto the very end, which I hope and pray will be as blest as the beginning. But I do wish I had the power to open and close the book upon it as I pleased – a Wishing Chair to carry me There and Back Again.

A New Life

"The Science agenda for the month states," Mrs Hassan frowned at the circular. "That you have to teach Plants, Magnets and Electricity. You barely finished Plants."

"Well, you see, they were interested in photosynthesis, so –"

"The English agenda," continued Mrs Hassan. "Required you to complete Chapters Five, Six and Seven. You failed to do this. Moreover, the subject coordinator tells me you have not been following her lesson plans."

"Because they are impossible! Look at today's plan –" Zoya held it up. "Reading and understanding a page-long comprehension, copying down ten questions from the whiteboard and answering them – within sixty minutes. The children can't do it, Ma'am. They're only seven years old."

"The children in the other sections are also seven years old, and their teachers don't appear to find it impossible. No –" The uplifted finger cut her off. "You must realise that we have standards to maintain at this school. Parent Complaints have started coming in, and if your work is not up to the mark …"

-Your work is not up to the mark- … The lipstick-rounded mouth moved on in slow motion, the sound emerging from it fading into a hazy background for the demon that had fallen silent for the first time in her life when she had walked into Class III Rust two months ago.

— Hah! Loser! So you thought you were good at this, did you? — … The spell was broken, not at the chimes of midnight but in this sunlit office with spaceship-cloud shadows on the wall and the taste of a familiar bitterness on her dry tongue.

— You suck at teaching, as you suck everything else, you loser —

She stumbled back to the staffroom, where her new friend Maya was sitting on the sofa eating samosas. "Zoya! How did the meeting – hey, are you okay?"

— Look at her, she's knows you're pathetic —

Zoya picked up a samosa and bit into it so fiercely her teeth clanged shut right through the potatoes. "I won't fail." She hissed. "This is my dream. I am going to be GOOD at it!"

"What –" The bell rang and Maya fled, cramming in the last of her samosa. "'alk 'oo – home-time!"

Zoya walked her way grimly down the corridor to her class. The students jumped up to greet her. "Gooood Morning, Miss!"

"Good morning. Sit down, take out your copies and write down the day and date. Then open your books to page 84. Quickly! We've wasted five minutes of the class already." The marker screeched as she printed 'ENGLISH' on the board. "Ahmad, start reading the first paragraph."

Ahmad's head emerged briefly from his bag "Miss, I can't find my book."

"Hurry up and take it out! Ali, you read."

"Yes Miss. What's the page number?"

— Nine minutes gone. You'll fail again, like you always do —

"Eighty-Four!" The snarl shocked the class into silence. "Listen to me! If you don't want to spend next year in Class III as well, we have to work much harder than this. Do you understand?"

Silence. Then – Bilal said – it could only be him – "Miss, may I go to drink water?"

Zoya quelled the spurt of giggles with a glare. "You just got in from recess, Bilal. Start reading, Ali!"

Too baffled to protest, they fidgeted, but they worked. In the fifteen minutes spent reading the passage – she had chosen only the best readers – Zoya had written out the questions. And for the first time she wrote down the answers as well, without first asking the class to attempt them.

"Miss, what is demonstate?" asked Asad.

"Demonstrate. Copy it all down, then I will explain."

"But Miss you always say we should understand what we are –"

"Copy it down first!"

By the fifty-sixth minute all the copies were piled on her desk, filling her with a savage triumph. She had done it! She glanced down at the first copy open, and felt irritation sweeping across her again.

"Whose copy is this? Raise your hand –" Bilal again, the goggle-eyed little – "Just look at this! The day and date are on the wrong sides, and the handwriting – ugh! And you've spelt dog b-o-g again!" She drew a large red circle around it. "I'm really very disappointed."

"HAHA!" Ahmad leapt out of his chair. "Told you! You know, Miss, he was so sure he was going to get a star today he made me put his copy on top! What a loser!"

Reflexively she had started up to intervene – Bilal generally responded to all taunts with a punch – but he was sitting quietly in his seat and did not even look up when Ahmad snapped his fingers in his face.

"Idiot, duffer! Loser!"

"Ahmad, sit down!"

— Loser —

Afterwards she always claimed it was the word that had made her realise … it would be all of thirty years before she told another young teacher how the echo of her own desolation in the eyes of a child she had always seen laughing had truly begun a new life for her, had begun her own exorcism in the very act of perpetuating the age-old circle of wretchedness that was gnawing its way into her soul.

"Everyone, please listen," Their palpable relief at seeing her smile made tears start to her eyes. "Please clap for yourselves – you all worked really hard today. And please clap especially loudly for Bilal – for trying the hardest and showing the most improvement!"

"Well, we have three minutes left. Let's play a round of Hangman with our new words before the bell rings. We need to work harder," She went on, trying not to laugh at their expressions. "That doesn't mean we can't have fun. Okay?"

"Okay!" They chorused.

"I'll go first," Said Bilal. "And tomorrow, I AM going to get a star. A GOLDEN star!"

Outside, the spaceship clouds had faded to a crooked wisp rather like the lopsided grin once again flashing on his face.

Aoi, Aoi, Ano Sora ...

I walk along your rues and avenues and boulevards, until I stand beside the indus-staid waters watching the swans float past within inches of my outstretched fingers. Was it here that they stood, les misérables of old? Did your people come down to whisper only to drown their sorrows, or did they tell you happy secrets too? Do you remember them too as I stand here thinking of them, the children of that 'old world' far further upon the road to oblivion here in their own patrie than in mine?

You are achingly beautiful, and I am glad you are to be my home for a space, though many of your children would fain have none of me. Here, O Capital of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Indifference, I am become The Hooded Stranger. I run the soft red cloth wound around my head through my fingers, and I wonder, is this all it takes to turn me into the sort of person mothers yank their children away from?

And yet - If I am not accepted I am at any rate endured. I am here. I walk your streets, eat of your fruit, board your trains alone. I study in halls of learning themselves a legend. The decree of silence and solitude your people pronounce upon me brings with it a new sort of freedom, as terrifying as it is exhilarating. So I sing my ghazals under my breath en flanant dans les rues, one more piéton, serene in the knowledge that the half-glares cast over shoulders at me have nothing to do with me, with the actual person beneath the hood of my religion and the brown skin of my race.

You are beautiful, and I love to look upon you, upon your bridges and archways and turrets and intricate little patterns scattered upon doorways like petrified confetti.

Most of all I like your stone people, who dress more like me than the real ones, and do not flinch when I stop to say Hello. I can talk to them at least without fear of giving offence. Your flesh-and-blood people, are they ever not in a hurry? Do they ever laugh? Smile? Just not look awfully tired and edgy and broken-inside-but-holding-up?

I look upon your blue skies streaked with white, shivering a little like me in the chill breezes of imminent winter, and I remember another sky that the sun has not yet deserted. I walk past the restos and cafés, and I try to invest them with the smell of barbeque on the coals, of steaming hot biryani, of a freshly made kulcha just pulled out of the oven. Already they are fading from sensation to memory, acquiring a touch of sepia, the haziness of things from a Once-upon-a-time land.

Soon, your language will begin to take hold of me. I begin to exclaim ah non and Mon Dieu and pétard. I find myself thinking in your tongue when I walk through your streets, translating back into my own languages and into Epfel. I think of my family and imagine them here, picture them walking up and down endless flights of stairs to catch a metro and laugh at their expressions ...

And, O mine own Land of the Lost, when I am come home at last to you, after ages that seem now beyond mortal accounting, shall I look upon you with a stranger's eyes, judging, criticising, mourning this other world I lived in for a little while? Shall I say, like so many others before me, "You know, over there, people would never be allowed to ..." "You know, over there, they never throw ..."

How long before I transition from horribly homesick to heartily sick of home? How long before I begin to fret and count the days left to the next adventure?

A Proper Confession

"You know me as a hunter," began Mr Fox "a warrior, a leader among fox-kind … But – alas! It was not always so. There was a time when –" Who shall blame him if his voice faltered to confess it? "I became a Subject of Mockery – at the hands of Poultry!"

Poultry! It took Mrs Fox a moment to overcome her agitation, but her smile did not falter. "Tell me all, and then we will put it behind us."

"It was a Human who was the cause of my downfall," continued Mr Fox, who had scarcely managed to wait long enough for her permission to avail himself of it.

"Until I came upon the town of Caledorne I was a good old fashioned cave-fox who ate rabbits for breakfast, cheerfully savaged any creature he did not like, and cared not a fig for any animal's opinion. On that calamitous winter afternoon, however, all this was destined to change.

"The forests were already covered with snow, and I had caught nothing for a week but one hapless sparrow, though I had prowled and lurked through every bush and tree hollow from here to the Valuné. I had never before eaten humans – yes, my dear, I was forced to contemplate even that extremity.

"As I stood on the edge of the Forest shivering and scratching my fur, the first coach of the day drew up at The Tinklin' Bell. I took it as a Sign, and after some basic lurking and prowling, selected as my prey a diminutive female in a black and yellow skin. Alack! Had I but known then that I was slinking fast to my Doom!

"Murderers had been known to become sheepishly contrite in That Presence; nay, even her own parents trembled inwardly as they addressed her. In my

deplorable ignorance, I contemplated the ultimate sacrilege – laying violent paws upon this formidable personage!

"'Reveal yourself at once!' Hands on her bow-knot-belted waist, a frown gathering over disapprovingly pursed lips, Miss Guinace Dunthair sternly contemplated this poor malefactor, who was trying now to steal away unnoticed.

"'Stop!' I stopped – 'Turn around and come here!' I turned around and went there. I can see that you think it rather poor-spirited conduct, but I really couldn't help it.

"I was surveyed over a short straight nose wrinkled with disgust. 'And just who may you be, my good sir? You are quite the most Peculiar Person I have ever come across!'

'I – I'm a fox.'

"'A fox? Hmm. Go and put on a respectable black frock-coat instead of this absurd brown. Moreover, please attend immediately to these horridly long nails. Does your mother not order them to be clipped regularly?

My mother! At my age! I ask you! 'I – don't have – a mother!' That took more courage than a whole pride of snake-fanged lions would have called for.

"In a moment her censorious manner vanished.

"'Oh you poor dear thing!' She patted my head sympathetically. 'How very dreadful! I do not wonder that you have no notion of Proper Conduct. However, this cannot be permitted to continue. I will undertake your instruction personally.'

"And thus I found myself washed and brushed, permed and polished, by a horde of attendants most provocatively aquiver with terror, so that I longed to growl a little just for

fun. My nails were cut so short they ached constantly, and these hind paws were encased in buckled boots. On my frame, trimmed to the last stray hair, were smothering linen swathings, fawn-skin breeches, and as decreed by Mademoiselle, a black frock-coat. The ensemble was rounded off by a bowler-hat and a strangulation device called a cravat.

"A horribly cold and cramped 'house' had been constructed, since my cosy cave was now taboo. Within, furnishings and accessories were tastefully and meticulously arranged. She left also an hour-long list of orders, which I shall spare you, though I shall retain of that discourse for the rest of my life an ineffaceable impression.

"At length I recovered enough to feel a bit peckish. I tried valiantly to content myself with the rations approved by my benefactress, but tea and seed-cake quite unequivocally made me sick. So I went out to hunt again. Unfortunately, mincing through the forest on one's hind-legs, body held stiff and head resolutely erect, is perhaps not the best way of hunting that a Fox can adopt. Yet I could not take the hat off – it would not have been Proper to step out of doors without a hat.

"And then! Woeful hour! I chanced upon a roosting hen. Noiselessly I crept up, and scooped her into my butterfly net. Once upon a time I would just have pounced upon her and ripped out her throat, but that was conduct grossly unworthy of a Gentle-fox. Wherefore, I clicked my heels and raised my hat to the hen as I tipped her into a sack, and walked home just in time to drag it into the larder and tuck myself in for an afternoon nap. I woke precisely at the time Proper etiquette dictated, and sat down to wait for

Supper. I dared not commit the heinous crime of Eating Between Meals.

The hen soon pecked her way out of the flimsy sacking. She filled it up with pebbles – it took her a good half hour, as she later informed me, but she felt it was wholly worth it – and knotted it up again. Then she ran off cackling to tell all her friends.

"When my watch finally struck seven, I lit a fire in the newly established stone hearth, and emptied the sack onto it. Imagine my shock when only pebbles came out! I watched them helplessly, uncertain as to the Proper Conduct in such a case. The fire hissed and crackled as they dried, and having drunk its fill, began to spit them out.

"The first hit me on the nose, making me leap upwards with a decidedly Improper oath, and the relentless bursts of stony splinters that followed caused me to perform twists and contortions which would have won a serpent's admiration.

"The thrashed and battered hat made Mrs Thrush and Company an excellent nest for the winter. The cravat and garments provided magpies for miles around with heirlooms generations would preen themselves upon. The boots were colonised by an old mouse woman with a dozen rascally children. The house went down in human history, as indeed it should have done. An old half-blind historian declared it the work of a new indigenous people, and pioneered the movement that led to their discovery five years later.

"But here I lurked, my reputation in shreds –"

"But you redeemed yourself," said Mrs Fox quickly.

"Ah yes, yes, my dear, but I am afraid I had acquired a – a taste – that I have never since managed to shake off, for what the humans call Reading. They take the flesh of trees and scratch marks upon them, and these marks become pictures in the brain … I – I hope you do not mind very much if I read sometimes?"

But Mrs Fox's pungently expressed rejoinder we must consign to decent and – er – Proper oblivion.

A Puzzle with Missing Pieces

When you see me next, I'll be flying on a wing, a single, loped-off, blood-stained wing no one understands. The birds are writing Spanish in the clouds, and chirping in German; but they steadfastly refuse to sing in the tongues of the home fading from my memory. I can remember my house, but not the chip-patterns on the floor; I can remember each wall, but not the scars on it.

Ashes of Roses

"Only one thing can heal me," She said. "I must change what I did."

"Ask me for another gift," I said. "I can give you a new life far from here, with no memory of the demon that haunts you."

"That would be another lie!"

"Pray then for a repentant heart, and peace will come –"

"Do you think I feel no remorse?"

In the ringing of her laughter I saw again the demon savaging her sister as she watched and did nothing. He saw her as he cast aside the dying child and went on his way, leaving a shard of her soul impaled upon the memory of his sneer. She watched unmoving the last of the light fade from the pain-crazed eyes, the last rattling breath grow still in her sister's torn throat, and thus began her long despair.

"Give me one more chance," She said. "And I will not walk the coward's way."

We debated, we Wise Ones of the mountains. We could not turn back time. But – were it only an illusion, it would nonetheless be no lie to her … Her redemption could be as real as the anguish now festering in her heart.

As she stepped forth now the knowledge was already within her – but she stood petrified as before, and I could do nothing. With the chasm opening before her, she shrank from her salvation and watched.

Afterwards, as she donned the robe of the exile and crushed the smouldering ashes of roses deep into her forehead, the tongues that should have uttered the traditional farewell were silent, for all her people had seen

her disgrace and their own with it. They too had watched – and done nothing. Again.

"One day I will go home," She always said. "Tomorrow, I will rise with a smile on my face…"

But her people shunned her, until the demon came again. Then they hunted her out and bound her to a stake as an offering.

"Now," Gloated the demon. "You are mine forever."

She smiled at the demon as only she could smile whose one crime was to have survived him before. "You broke me that day," She said. "Or perhaps I was broken already, and you forced me to see it. But if I was born a wretched coward, daughter of a people more craven still, you at least shall not have any more of us to consume. Avaunt!"

She waited out the last thunderings of the demon's rage, laughing, still laughing, as he vanished. Now all of a sudden she was a heroine, and they would have fain have borne her home in high honour, but she shook her head.

"Go with them," I said to her. "Go home. Tomorrow is here."

"Aye," She said softly. "And so I rise with a smile on my face."

Every year, they put wreaths of laurels upon the elegant marble tombstone. But when I go there, I scatter an urn full of ashes of roses at her feet.

Asi Es La Vida

'O Raven days, dark Raven days of sorrow...' The line is stuck in my head like a biscuit-commercial jingle and a witch-chaunt rolled into one, and I do not know what to do about it. If I were not half-crazy with guilt, there would be no need to do anything, and it would go away all by itself, like a new song looped for six days and then quasi-forgotten. But I have a conscience trained in the 'you must do your homework before you can ---' tradition, and it demands that I spend every waking minute on work until every single assignment is done and done and done indeed.

Therefore? nonetheless? most of my deadlines tend to whoosh past with a vengeance. For there are muffled poems inside me that I have not the strength to excavate, and I know the whetted ivory beaks of the Raven Days are pecking them a tunnel out of the abyss. I would not stop them if I could, even though my conscience says that I should. My conscience, you see, is a messed-up idiot that never did learn to choose between must-be-dones. If it had its way, it would harrow me out of ever writing a single poem or story, and then scold me to death for never having done so.

Thus here I am, jitterily scrolling the feed, sharing and retweeting stuff and wondering what on earth I am going to do about my work if the Raven Days do not stop thrumming inside me and what on earth I am going to do if they do stop. Because each time a stuck line fades out, a sweet desolation lingers in the brain, like the aftertaste of half-a-dozen cold sweet mangoes. Gorged on mangoes you do not write academic things, you share lame puns and dank memes and wonder if everything you have ever written is pure genius that will be discovered a hundred

years after you die or pure drivel that deserves to be burnt. Then you fall asleep scribbling fragmented poem first-drafts on randomly grabbed pieces of paper, and wake up simultaneously flipping with worry and whooping for joy.

A Stupid Mistake

Farya's parents were the coolest in the whole world. Her Papa had a Dumbledore-beard, and her Mama wore a long black robe just like the Hogwarts uniform. Her only regret was the pointy wizard hat. Mama had bought Farya a black one for her last birthday that became pink when she turned it inside out, and Farya wore it to school every day, but Mama went on wearing her old black hood. People craned around to look when she walked down the aisles of the supermarket with Mama and Papa, and she smiled and waved proudly back at them.

Then one day in the supermarket, she waved at a lady who was dragging a little girl with goldilocks-hair after her, and the lady didn't smile back. She shook her fist at them, the shopping bags dangling like stirrups on a cartoon-horse. "Go back!" She hissed. "Go back where you came from, you terrorist b——s!"

"Mama, what are terrorist b——s? Why does that Aunty want us to go home? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, darling, you didn't" Mama smiled and kissed her and bought her a chocolate, but Farya could see her mother's face breaking into frowny patches when she thought Farya wasn't looking.

She crept back after bedtime to the top of the stairs to secretly watch TV with Mama and Papa, but they hadn't turned on the TV at all. Farya shrank into the railing, her heart hammering in her throat. She crept downstairs slowly, shielded by the shadows of the living-room light.

Mama was sobbing with her head on Papa's shoulder, and he was whispering to her, patting her arm. "We have to stay here now. For Farya. For her future. Ignore them. They don't know … They don't understand, you see," He

was saying. “They don’t hate us – they don’t even see us. They see only a stranger – someone different – and they are afraid.”

“But how can they not understand? Are they blind? There are pictures, videos –”

Papa fell back onto the sofa with a sigh. “We watched videos too, remember?” He said. “We watched them for years, watched them grow worse, draw closer to us every day. What did we understand? No –” He groped absently for the TV remote on the table. “No one can ever understand, unless it happens to them. Unless they watch their country ripped to pieces, razed to the ground – unless someone digs out his own mother in three pieces from the rubble and buries her back in it because there is no time to dig –”

Now it was Mama who was holding him. “Then God forbid that they should ever know.” She said softly, and Farya ran upstairs and stuffed her head into her pillow.

The next morning, when she was making her brunch-sandwich with Mama, singing furiously to drown them out, Papa called her. “Farya, do you know where we come from?”

She could see the tear-marks on his face, and his smile had cracks in it, like Mama’s. Farya twisted her hands free and ran in blind panic. “We come from HERE!” She shouted. “I won’t come from anywhere else, I WON’T!” She ran all the way to school without even waiting for Anne.

Anne could have been a goldilocks girl too, only her hair was cropped and she hated porridge. They became friends first, then best friends when Anne snatched back Farya’s doll from Susie. She thought Anne would be angry

with her for not waiting but Anne never came to school. At home-time her mother was waiting at the gate, and from the way her fingers spun the beads under her gown Farya knew she was praying hard. At home she went on praying too, and shook her head whenever Farya asked if she could go and play with Anne.

She finally nodded off and Farya fled. She would say sorry later but she had to find out why Anne hadn't come to school. She could hear the pounding on the stairs and the scuffling voices inside Anne's house. She knocked and knocked, until Anne came out, looking as forlorn as Farya felt.

"You are not sick, are you? I won't go to school without you again. I promise!"

"My mother says I'm not supposed to play with you anymore."

"What?"

"She says you're a – a terrorist."

Anne's face swelled out into the lady's at the supermarket, then shrank back into Anne's, then swelled – "What's a – terrorist?"

"Your dad is one. Mum says terrorists like him blew up Uncle Sammy's office and killed him."

"My dad never killed anyone!"

Anne kicked a stone off the pavement. "My mum says he did. She says you're all terrorists."

Upstairs a window opened with a clang. "Anne, I said two minutes!"

"And I can't talk to you in school either," said Anne, kicking another stone into the road.

"But we're best friends!"

"ANNE!"

Farya ran before Anne could turn away from her, ran all the way into her own room and stayed there with the muffly pillow over her head until her mother called her down for dinner. Papa smiled at Farya when she entered, and she knew she had to say the lines she had rehearsed before they became muddled again.

"Papa, my friend Anne's Mum says you're a terrorist." She rushed on. "If you're a terrorist I want to be one too."

"WHAT?"

"Anne said it – I was just –" Tears began to sting her eyelids. Now everyone hated her, everyone was angry with her, even Papa. "I told her you weren't but she said her Mum said it and the lady at the supermarket said it too, she said go back you terrorist b——s –"

"Farya," Papa was holding her hands in his, squeezing them in his special Papa way, and his voice was gentle again. "Farya, listen to me. We are NOT terrorists. Whatever Anne's mother says, whatever any one says, we. are. not. terrorists. Do you understand me?"

"But then why does everyone say it? Anne's mum won't let her talk to me, and she's my best friend!"

Suddenly he looked old, wrinkly like the picture of Grandma that hung in the drawing-room. "Some of them – some of the terrorists – they look like us," He said at last. "But they aren't us, and we aren't them. Remember that, Farya. This is our country now. We belong here, though some people can't see that yet. But they will. One day, they will."

"Will Anne's Mum see it? Will she let me play with Anne?"

Instead of answering, he began to crackle his knuckles and to make the funny wriggly-eared faces that always

made her shriek with laughter. Afterwards Mama let Farya wash her own plate and spin it round and round in the cloth until it was quite dry.

"Tomorrow," said Farya, as Mama tucked her in "I'll tell Anne's mum it was all a stupid mistake, and then Anne can be best friends with me again."

That night they did not turn on the TV either. Instead they sat there in the darkness all night wondering what they could do stop their little girl's world from coming undone.

A Table for Two

Once upon a time there was a lonely little cottage on the bleakest mountaintop in the whole world. Inside this cottage lived a lonely little wolf. She always set the table for two and kept a freshly trimmed lamp in the window after sunset. But no one ever came to see her. This made her very sad.

"I wish I had other wolves to talk to," she often sighed to herself. "There's old Mrs. Tabletop and Grandpa Oakendoor and dear little Juniper over there, but it's just not the same thing, is it?"

"There, there, dearie," said Mrs Tabletop soothingly. "You'll find friends someday, don't you worry."

Little Wolfie dozed off, comforted. Mrs Tabletop gave Grandpa Oakendoor a shove.

"Wake up! We have to do something!"

"We – ah yes, yes, quite right, so we must, so we must. Something, what? That's the spirit, eh? Let's do something!"

"Quite, but what shall we do?"

"Something. Don't fret, old girl. Something always does turn up!"

Juniper snorted. "Of all the tosh! Things don't just 'turn up'!" But neither of the old people paid her any heed at all, so she gave one more hoity-toity sniff and went back to sleep.

Now, as it happened, Something was passing by the window just as Grandpa Oakendoor mentioned him. He saw Wolfie's wan face and made up his mind at once: here was one very special turning up to do before he turned in for the night.

So he knocked merrily on the door and stepped inside with a right cheery 'what ho' as Grandpa swung out of the way. Wolfie leapt up, all awake all at once.

"Oh hi!" She said brightly. "Do come in out of the storm … Dear, dear! You're my very first visitor and I don't even know what – er – who you are!"

"I'm Something."

"If it isn't too awfully rude – what?"

"Something. I turn up, every now and again."

"Oh," said Wolfie doubtfully.

"I've come to take you on a little adventure," said Something. "To see the other little wolves in the forest."

"Oh have you really? How splendid!" Cried Wolfie. "Let me just get my coat. And my hair – oh dear! I'll be just a moment. Please don't go away, Something!"

She rushed away to get her things. Something stared Mrs Tabletop, then at Juniper, then at Grandpa – "Good grief." He said finally. "Has she always been like this?"

"Yes indeed, the little darling!" said Mrs Tabletop. "I found her sleeping near my front left leg one day, poor little mite. All alone she was, but such a dear little thing even then. Why, you never would believe …"

"So – she's never seen another wolf?" said Something slowly.

"Not that I ken of," said Grandpa Oakendoor.

"Well, she's in for something of a shock, that's all," muttered Something grimly to himself, and he wondered if he should just vanish off the map. But that was the catch to being Something; one didn't just disappear once one had turned up.

So off they went into the forest, searching for wolves. Something knew where they were, of course, but he was

dawdling his very hardest to avoid them, and Wolfie kept on stopping to exclaim at stuff.

Suddenly a fierce growl emerged from the bushes, followed by a pair of dripping fangs bared from a ferocious snarl, and then a huge pulsating mass of hair, matted with blood and stinking to the tip of its crouched tail. Wolfie shrank away.

"Goodness gracious!" she cried. "What in the world is that terrible creature?"

"That," said Something. "Is a wolf."

"Right ho!" said the grinning creature hoarsely. "A wolf. Welcome to the club, little lady!"

"A – wolf? No. No. No!" cried Wolfie. "You're lying! You can't be a wolf! You just can't! Ugh! Go away, you dirty thing!"

"Well, I – " began the indignant wolf, but Something broke in hastily. "Look, a rabbit! A rabbit in the bush!"

The wolf bounded away. Wolfie had soaked her hanky clean through by now.

"It c-can't be true. It just can't!" she wailed. "They're not all like that, are they?"

Something sighed. "Yes, they are, but –"

Wolfie wouldn't listen. She cried all the way back to the cottage and ran inside and shut the door in Something's face.

"Go away," She said firmly. "I'm sorry, but I think it would be best if you never turned up again."

"But – but I – " began Something.

"Shoo! Shoo!" Said Mrs Tabletop, and drew the curtain firmly across the window, shutting out the sputtering Something for good. "Tell me, dearie, what's the matter?

Oh no, of course all wolves aren't horrid! You'll see, you'll meet a fine handsome young wolf just like you …"

But Wolfie never set the table for two again.

A White Lie

"The King signed it!" He was beaming at me with the fierce tenderness that always set me alight, like the morning sea glowing in the warmth of the sun. "Look!"

Gingerly I took the scroll from him, and traced the beautifully inked markings with my finger. I could not yet read whole words, only the letters Daedalus had taught me that were scattered inside them, and my own name.

"This paper makes you a free woman, Naucrate. Do you understand?" I did not, but I knew he would not wait for my answer, so I nodded nonetheless. "It means that my son will be born to a free woman of Greece – my wedded wife, not a bedslave from the household of Minos!"

In celebration he gave a great feast, and all in Crete flocked eagerly to it, gentle and common alike. Some for love and friendship of my lord; most because they knew Daedalus was in high favour with the king. They brought gifts for me too as I sat beside him, fourteen years old and visibly near motherhood, a free woman of Greece, for all that I had the red-gold hair and green eyes of my slave mother. I knew they sniggered, but I did not care.

I have always wondered if it was in truth the happiest moment of my life, or merely the last one without the taint of dread upon it … Afterwards they told me it was that very night that Pasiphae was to lie with Poseidon's snow-white bull … but you must have known this then, Daedalus, though you gave no sign of it.

And how the fates laughed to watch us! No – they did not laugh; they were angered. Else they would not have sent us Alcisthene. For twenty years I have thought of her only with loathing – but now – now that I should hate and

revile her more than ever, I think I understand: it was never she who doomed us, Daedalus. It was you.

I felt the iron steal into Daedalus as she walked up to us and bowed, the slave boy behind her holding up her gift, felt his hand stiffen on mine. "I felicitate you, Uncle," She said. "I pray that your child may he be born a boy, strong and healthy, and that he may grow up to be a credit to his father."

Daedalus said nothing; it was I, finally, who stammered out the ritual thanks, but it was at him that she looked. "May your firstborn child be a boy, dear Uncle Daedalus, and may he grow up to be like his cousin Talus."

"Out! Get out!" He hissed, and I flinched for her as he raised his hand to strike. But she stared him back down, smiling all the while.

"Ah look, I have frightened your little slave concubine. Did you never hear the name of Talus, little pigeon? Talus, my baby brother who worshipped the ground his uncle walked on, like our poor mother – and yet was so brilliant he invented the saw at the age of ten just by looking at the spine of a fish. No? Never?"

"But it was Daedalus who invented the saw!" And until that moment I had believed it – I would fain have gone on believing it all my life, but that I could not unread the truth of her words in his eyes.

"Is that what he told you? No, my poor deluded child, all he did was throw the boy out of a tower, for fear that he would become a greater man than himself. Look how she clings to him, the little fool! … He loved you, Daedalus. Loved you and trusted you like his mother, like this child here. You remember her, don't you? Perdrix, your sister who still refuses to believe you murdered her son…" She

spoke softly enough, but the guests were beginning to gather around us, listening avidly to this story they all knew but would never have dared to repeat in the presence of Daedalus.

"You know, when they told her Daedalus had killed his nephew, she refused to believe them. They showed her Talus's brains spattered on the rocks next to his broken body, and she would only say 'My brother could never have done this'. And do you know what he did, little pigeon, when she went to see him in prison? He held her and kissed her cheek and told her 'He fell. There was nothing I could do.' When they imprisoned him for his crime, she knelt before his dungeon and prayed for his freedom. When they cast him out as a kinslayer, she clung to him and wept. Wept …"

She took the box from the slave's hands. "She sent you her love, Daedalus, and bade me tell you she burns an offering every day to pray for your return. Look – here is her gift for your lady – an armlet blessed by the priestess of Pallas Athene herself. Look, is it not beautiful?"

Daedalus tore it from her hand and flung it to the floor, scattering the beads to the sound of her harsh barking laughter. "Get you hence, Alcisthene," he said, caring nothing for the whispering Cretans all around us, "or I swear I will kill you too."

"Oh I am going, dear Uncle, don't fret … Goodbye, fledgling." I shrank closer to Daedalus as her hand rested fleetingly on my cheek. "I am going, Daedalus, but this curse I now pronounce upon you will linger in every broken fragment of that wretched trinket my mother made for you: may your son die at your hands as Talus died – may his mother suffer as the mother of Talus suffers!"

I asked him nothing, I spoke no word, not even when they were all gone and I stood trembling in our bedchamber looking blankly out upon the starry night. "Alcisthene is gone," he said and wrapped me close to him in the Persian shawl he had given me that morning. "She will never hurt our baby. I made sure of it."

And in his strong, strong arms I was sure of it too. Icarus, how was I to know that he had already sealed your cousin's curse upon you with her blood? It was not fear for you that made me tremble that night … though if I had known then what I know now I would have jumped from the window ledge and let the sea swallow us both then and there.

"Did you really lie to your sister?" The horror growing inside me spilled past my lips, though I had bitten them to the quick to stifle it. "That wasn't true, was it, Daedalus? Daedalus?"

He flung me from him then, and the repulsion, the wrath in his face made me crumple to his feet. "Aye. It was a lie – a little white lie, to save the stupid woman's life. Do you think she would have survived the knowledge that her precious brother had murdered her son? Do you think I should have told her the truth? Do you?"

I called after him, clutched at his cloak, sobbing, incoherently begging forgiveness – but he knocked me aside and went away. Sometime during the night I must have fallen asleep on the floor, because I woke up screaming to a boy with his brains smashed on the rocks and Alcisthene making a mountain of armlets around him. But he was there to hold me and soothe my terror away, and in the months that followed our happiness returned to

us, piece by piece at first, and then all of it at once when Icarus was born.

He had his father's handsomeness and his fierce courage, but none of his skill, for which I offered up a prayer of gratitude every single day. Because I knew instinctively that Daedalus could never have loved him so unreservedly otherwise … Icarus had no love of his father's craft, and so I thought him safe from him, from Alcisthene's curse. And then five years later came my baby Iapyx, a gift from the heavens, with the green eyes and the sweet calm goodness of my own mother, a serenity that spread around him like a breath of divine love. Icarus dreamt of wars and gallant deeds, but Iapyx yearned always to heal: from babyhood he could soothe a withering blossom back to life. He was devoted from the first to Daedalus, like Talus, like his sister Perdrix, with that total and unshakeable devotion which the guilelessly good always give to those who deserve it the least.

We were happy all those years, while my boys were growing up. Now I know it was only a fleeting, borrowed happiness, doomed from the first – how could it not be, with kinsblood upon my husband's hands and a Minotaur ranging the labyrinth of my husband's making, gorging upon the tribute of innocent lives offered unto it every day? I wish I could say now that it weighed upon Daedalus, or at least that it cast a shadow upon my own blissful contentment: but the truth is, I was completely, thoughtlessly happy.

And then Princess Ariadne fell in love with an Athenian Prince, and gave him the ball of unbreakable endlessly stretchable golden thread Daedalus had gifted her, so that he could find his way out of the labyrinth after slaying the

vile beast. It was Iapyx who brought me the news – the bringing of ill news always did fall to him, for there was no sorrow his very presence could not lighten. Minos had locked Daedalus in a tower-cell, and Icarus with him … Almost I was glad of it, for I knew there was no prison in the world that could hold my Daedalus. He would find a way to break free, to come home to us or to take us wherever he went, and Icarus, who might otherwise have done something reckless upon learning the King's decree, would be safer with him meanwhile than he would be anywhere else.

I knew Daedalus loved him as dearly as I did; I thought he would die before he let any harm come to our son … Icarus, Icarus, my first-born, my darling boy, did you call for your mother as you fell from the sun on the wings of your father's making? Did you think of me as the waves swallowed you and he flew on, weeping? … Iapyx brought me Daedalus's letter when he told me, but it did not speak of you. It was a scrip of parchment, soiled and torn, that said only "The boy fell. I told him not to fly so high, but he did not listen. There was nothing I could do."

"He fell. There was nothing I could do." And there she was, Alcisthene watching her mother's armlet shatter on the wooden flooring, laughing, laughing, building mountains of armlets around Icarus lying smashed upon the cliffs, building mountains of armlets soaked in the blood dripping from her own slashed throat.

They tell me I lay in a fever for weeks, screaming "it was a lie! A little white lie" … but it is not a lie this time, is it, Daedalus? You could lie to all the world and to yourself too, but you never could lie to me.

I can see you now in the tower cell, your magnificent brain already at work as you watch the gulls soaring past, measuring, calculating, planning, not with glazed and dreaming eyes like Icarus standing beside you. I can see how you set yourself to copy their wings, so intent upon your craft you are free already from the prison Minos thinks will hold you for life.

I can see Icarus standing beside you, his eyes wide with wonder and admiration, all without understanding a word of your numbers and squiggles and triangles chalked up on the wall. He is nodding as you fit the harness around his shoulders and warn him not to fly too high; but already his heart is yearning to brush the wings of Apollo's chariot with his own, and he hears nothing …

Iapyx tells me you have promised to send for me as soon as you have found us a secure refuge, and I smile and agree. But I know you, Daedalus. I know you as nobody else in the whole world does, and I know you will never send for me. I will never see you again, Daedalus, because to me you cannot tell the half-truths you tell yourself. I know that the only refuge you need now is from me, lest I hold you up to the mirror of your own soul as I should have done all these years. You cannot look into the eyes of your son's mother knowing that you watched him drown and did not plunge into the waves after him as he would have after you without an instant's hesitation.

But you would not have to, Daedalus. It is not the truth I want from you: I know it already, and unless you are here to hold me I cannot shut it out of my heart as I always have done. Daedalus, Daedalus, for once in your life, please tell me a lie too. A white lie – a little white lie … that

is all I am asking of you now, all I will ask of you forevermore.

Tell me how you watched over our Icarus, flying into the sun to pull him downward, hauling him up again and again when he swooped too low. Tell me how, when his wings gave way and he fell, you cast away your own and threw yourself in after him, offering your life to Poseidon instead of his, offering your knowledge, your art, everything that you are and could be …

Hold me now and tell me how you wept and prayed that the tears of Perdrix and the blood of her children would be repaid by your life and not his, how the power of your love and the wonder of your craft won my child's life from the ocean itself. Tell me over and over that Alcisthene's curse had no power in it, until I can pretend to unknow the truth about you as I always have done, Daedalus.

Tell me how you left our son to rest upon a rocky little islet you named for him, living and waiting for us, and that one day, we will all go there to live with him, flying out over the ocean on wings stronger than the sun, stronger than the wind and the waves, and live happily ever after, away from towers and minotaurs and the palaces of Kings.

Come back to me, Daedalus. Don't be afraid of me. It's not the truth I want from you. I know it already. All I am asking for now is one little white lie …

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The Foreignest Of Them All – Tint Journal
The Harvest – Friday Flash Fiction
The Hounds of Kazun – Flash Fiction Magazine
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The Swans – Entropy 2
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About The Author

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

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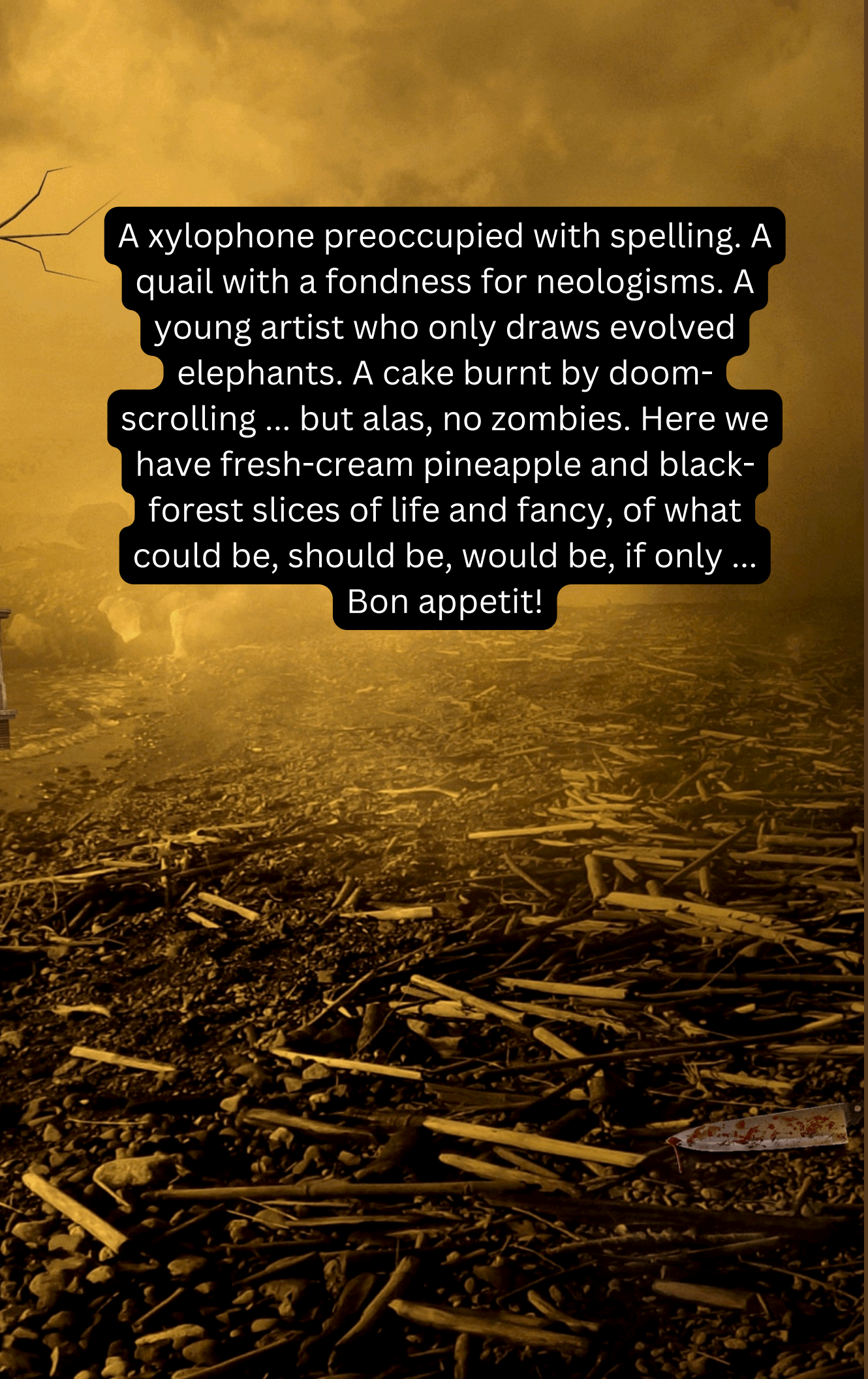
A xylophone preoccupied with spelling. A quail with a fondness for neologisms. A young artist who only draws evolved elephants. A cake burnt by doom-scrolling … but alas, no zombies. Here we have fresh-cream pineapple and black-forest slices of life and fancy, of what could be, should be, would be, if only … Bon appetit!